

THE EARLY BUDDHIST AFFIRMATION OF SELF (ĀTMAN)
IN THE LOGIC, PARABLES AND IMAGERY
OF THE PĀLI NIKĀYAS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to defend the view of a small but increasing minority of scholars that Gotama did not deny but affirmed the self, or 'ātman'. The Buddhist tradition assumes that he denied it when he taught that we should not say of the various aspects of our personality which we recognize to be impermanent and involved in suffering: 'This belongs to me, this I am, this is my self.' But the saying is ambiguous. If Gotama believed (which he nowhere says that he did) that the perishable aspects of personality are all that we are, it follows that he denied the self of the mystics, the ātman. If, however, his analysis was intended only to identify what is perishable as not the essential self, the reality of the ātman is implied. Buddhism would no longer be an anomaly. Gotama's utterances would be seen to belong with other Indian expressions of apophatic mysticism, like the 'neti! neti!' of the Upaniṣads (although they cannot simply be equated since deep philosophical and sociological differences separate the traditions). The study has three parts:

1. A survey of Western scholarly views over the last 150 years, evaluating the handling of textual evidence and the way in which scholars have taken sides over the meanings of anattā and nibbāna.
2. A survey of Theravādin views, ancient and modern, seeking reasons for the misunderstanding of Gotama's utterances in the period of dogmatic consolidation and loyal literalism after the early preaching.
3. A reassessment of the Pāli Nikāyas, examining especially the figures of speech, parables and imagery relating to the self.

It is argued that Gotama affirmed the self elliptically to discourage speculation and focus on the practical nature of the path.

It is concluded that there has indeed been a two thousand-year misunderstanding of Gotama's teaching about the self, but the tradition compensated for it by shifting onto the concept of nirvāṇa all of the significance that at first was shared with the ātman. The view still held by some scholars that nirvāṇa at first meant simple extinction collapses entirely.

INTRODUCTION

Of all the alleged sayings of Gotama recorded in the Pāli Nikāyas the one most frequently repeated, and which is most typical of his teaching, is the brief question-and-answer exchange on which tradition bases the belief that he denied the existence of the self. This exchange is incorporated into perhaps a hundred dialogues without alteration in any significant detail. One example is the following:

What do you think about this, Aggivessana? Is the material shape permanent or impermanent? Are feeling . . . perception . . . the habitual tendencies permanent or impermanent? What do you think about this, Aggivessana? Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?

"Impermanent, good Gotama."

"But is what is impermanent anguish or is it happiness?"

"Anguish, good Gotama."

"But is it fitting to regard that which is impermanent, anguish, liable to change as 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self'?"

"This is not so, good Gotama."¹

In the recitation of the sutta the whole exchange is repeated for each of the five factors of personality (khandhas), so the point is made with great insistence that all that we normally take ourselves to be--this whole psycho-physical complex--is perishable; that because of its transience we experience suffering; and because it brings us suffering we ought not to regard it as the essential self or ātman ('attā' in Pāli). This ātman, in the Indian tradition was by definition permanent and beyond suffering. As the innermost self it was the goal of yogins to realize it and liberate it from the round of suffering. It is obvious that Gotama, too, uses the word in this sense from the way in which he contrasts it with all that is impermanent and caught up in suffering. Plainly, he is urging us not to identify ourselves with the perishable body and mind.

Since this interpretation of the dialogue makes excellent sense, how has it come to be understood by all later Buddhists as a denial

¹Middle Length Sayings I p.286

that the ātman exists? The misunderstanding did not arise for some centuries after the time of Gotama, we know, since it is absent from the Sutta Piṭaka. Evidently the first generation of his followers understood what kind of utterance it was because they were still in touch with the many and varied forms of Indian intellectual and religious life. But as the Buddhist communities grew in size they created an intellectual world of their own, and in their isolation their ideas, like Darwin's Galapagos finches and turtles, underwent a gradual change. In order to deal with dissension within the Order, each branch of early Buddhism developed its own dogmatic system of textual interpretation in which there was little room for nuances of meaning, and even less for figurative ways of speaking. This, it seems, is how it came about that Gotama's most characteristic figurative use of language, his apophatic or elliptical way of speaking about the ātman, was understood as a negation of the ātman. If the Buddhist communities had still been in contact with the broad stream of Indian religious life they would never have countenanced the idea that their founder had denied the ātman, because this would have been absurd. A mystical teacher does not set out to deny the very aim of the yogins' path. Surely, the only explanation must be that the word itself had undergone a change of meaning within the small society of the Buddhists themselves, akin to the semantic change that overtakes words in society at large. The figurative meaning of Gotama's utterances was lost and their logic reversed as the monks, with immense devotion and loyalty, took all that he had said literally.

This is very understandable, in terms of the dynamics of large religious institutions. Every such institution needs, as a binding force within itself and as a means of self-definition in relation to other 'faiths', some dogma to follow, if not blindly, at least with unswerving loyalty. Operating within such institutions, too, is the pressure of rationalism to eliminate all enigmas and ambiguities. For such rationalism

religious significance is not the impelling force so much as the creation of system. There is a tendency to preserve the letter of the foundation documents of the institution because these are the charter for its very existence. In this way the belief in 'no self' has become the great defining characteristic of Buddhism for all the world. The doctrine is what sets Buddhism apart from Hinduism and makes it unique, and yet it is a pointless and perverse teaching which has created endless difficulties for the Buddhists themselves, such as how to reconcile it with the belief in rebirth. However, nothing that detracts from its value is as powerful as the value the doctrine has in terms of its institutional momentum. Buddhists are very unlikely to give it up, whatever scholars may say.

But the scholars are not about to ask Buddhists to give up believing that Gotama denied the self, because the view to the contrary is held by only a small minority, even amongst those whose special field of interest is early Buddhism. The Buddhists have thrown so much dust in everyone's eyes over this issue that we are only beginning to see clearly what the character of the earliest form of Buddhism was. Many scholars say anyway that their chief interest is in what Buddhists think, or in the living religion, and they are not about to embark on a quest for the historical Gotama. Their motives are admirable, yet this is a myopic attitude because all religions look back to their founders and revere their utterances, and it is an important stimulus to a religion's growth and vitality for it constantly to review and reassess the founder's words. Buddhism in India already expresses a degree of ecumenism, and the rediscovery of Gotama's affirmation of the ātman would no doubt aid its development. Scholarship obviously has a role to play in the contemporary self-criticism and evolution of religion, although the Buddhist communities have not yet encountered the findings of scholarship in the way that the Christian churches have in this century.

In fact we are still a long way off from the stage at which scholarly opinion can exert an influence on Buddhism because of the confused state of scholarship itself. Nearly half of the present study is taken up with an effort to see why this is the case. From it several extraordinary ironies emerge. Western scholars have tended to be very narrow specialists in the field of Buddhist studies, which has meant, in effect, that they have taken upon themselves the limitation of the Buddhist scholiasts and interpreted the tradition from within itself. Yet they also tried to preserve their critical detachment, with the ironic result that they have added a further layer of rationalist misunderstanding to the Buddhists' original one, concerning the doctrines of anattā and nibbāna. Whereas in Buddhism the early, mystical significance of the word 'ātman' fell away but the concept of nibbāna retained its transcendental meaning--taking over the whole of a meaning that the ātman idea had once shared with it--the Western scholars made the mistake of thinking that nibbāna too was empty of any transcendental significance.

The Western scholars who have taken this point of view attribute to Gotama an austere, pessimistic and sceptical outlook, interpreting his refusal to indulge in speculative metaphysics about the goal of his Path as a foreshadowing of contemporary empiricism or positivism. On this account the transcendental interpretation of his teachings was a later corruption, turning what was only a gloomy philosophy of life into a mystical religion. As the first chapter of this study shows, this viewpoint is still that of a significant number of scholars, four of whom at least have published substantial books in the last few years arguing that the original goal was simply extinction, or to bring to an end the round of suffering by preventing any further rebirth.

One of the ironies of this is that the interpretation rests upon a partial recovery of the original meaning of the word 'ātman', so that it appears to these scholars that Gotama denied any mystical reality in

denying the reality of the ātman. In the Buddhist tradition, on the other hand, the 'self' that it came to be thought the Buddha had denied was something else, about which it is impossible to be clear since the doctrine defies the best Buddhist minds still to make sense of it. With the original meaning of the word lost the texts simply are not coherent and the only meaning that can be attached to them is a sophistical one. Yet this impossibility of achieving clarity has been made serviceable in the tradition by turning it into a mystical paradox and allowing it to confirm the Buddha's insistence that the dharmā lies beyond the grasp of the rational intellect! The doctrines of anattā and nibbāna are held in tension: we have no self, and yet we can enter nibbāna, or as Buddhaghosa expressed it, 'Nibbāna exists but not he who enters it.' We must not overlook the important ways in which the tradition succeeded in preserving much of the spirit of the anattā teaching while reversing its logic, for there was a sense in which Gotama denied the self. He denied that all that we normally take to be our self belongs to, or can be identified with, the ultimate Self. Buddhists have grasped that this was not a denial of the common-sense self's existence but of its eternity, which means that they have been able to read a great many of the texts in their intended spirit despite the logical misunderstanding. The characteristic Buddhist expression: 'There is no permanent self', although not what Gotama meant at all, is serviceable provided the focus of attention in saying it is on our perishable nature.

But there has been a price to pay for the misunderstanding in that the goal, nibbāna, was made more remote and unintelligible than Gotama's silence had made the ātman. The concept of the ātman, India's most fruitful mystical idea, even if it is placed beyond all speculation as Gotama placed it, still has the power to suggest our innermost reality as being something great and valuable. Buddhists cut themselves off from this resource in the expression of their mysticism, which is surely

one of the reasons for the shifting of the goal in the Mahāyāna tradition from the abstract nirvāṇa to that of oneself becoming a Bodhisattva or a Buddha. This should not be put down merely to the Hindu influence. The personal element in the goal, having been lost, needed to be reintroduced.

The point of view that is taken in this study, as it was mentioned earlier, is held by only a small number of scholars. It was first argued by George Grimm in 1916 and has been defended since then by others who evidently took little account of Grimm's work, amongst them Mrs Rhys Davids, Horner, Coomaraswamy, Radhakrishnan and Nakamura. George Grimm, who, incidentally, had the reputation of being 'the most benevolent judge in Bavaria', went far more deeply into the problem than any of the others mentioned. Then, in 1980, Joaquín Pérez-Remón published his extremely full and careful study of all of the relevant material in the Pāli Nikāyas. This book came to hand when the present study was half completed and turned it in another direction. After Pérez-Remón's book Buddhist studies can not be the same again, because even if there is strong disagreement with his thesis it will have to be answered and his powerful readings of particular passages will have to be acknowledged. The present study is essentially a response to his work.

This 'Introduction' has been an attempt to draw some of the general implications for the Buddhist tradition as a whole which Pérez-Remón has stopped short of drawing in confining himself strictly to the study of the texts. In the first chapter the scholarly debate about anattā and nibbāna is traced, leading up to his work and outlining his arguments and conclusions. In the second chapter the Theravādin tradition is discussed, from the Abhidhamma Pitaka, through Buddhaghosa to the present, emphasizing the views of contemporary Theravādins who have written about their tradition in a scholarly as well as a popular way. This chapter

seeks for reasons for the misunderstanding of Gotama's teaching of anattā and tries to show how the concept of nibbāna became the focus of the transcendental significance that once (if our theory is correct) also attached to the ātman or attā. One interesting modern exception to the viewpoint of contemporary Theravādins is discussed, that is the empiricism of David Kalupahana. He shares the view of some Western scholars that Buddhism was originally a philosophy rather than a religion and rejected a trans-empirical reality. Very much enamoured of modern Western empiricism, Kalupahana sees Gotama as a forerunner of this outlook.

The long final chapter in this study is a fresh assessment of the evidence both for and against the view that Gotama affirmed the self in the Pāli Nikāyas. The method is not to select passages which appear to support the theory but to seek out the passages that are most typical of the Nikāyas as a whole and of Gotama's message as a whole, in order to show that what is called for is a radical reinterpretation of his message. The evidence for the theory comes from the passages which everyone acknowledges to be central to the Buddhist teaching, and not from merely a few peripheral texts. In order to try to complement Pérez-Remón's work to some degree, an attempt is made to focus on the figures of speech, parables and imagery in the suttas. These proved to be surprisingly consistent in the support they afford to the view that Gotama affirmed the essential or inner self. This emphasis on the similes and stories in the texts enabled the present writer to use his experience and methods acquired as an academic in the field of literary criticism to elucidate a valuable aspect of the Pāli texts which has not before received close attention.

CHAPTER I

A SURVEY OF WESTERN SCHOLARLY VIEWS

I THE NINETEENTH CENTURY¹

Although discussion and speculation about the Buddhist goal began in the West in the Eighteenth century, it is Eugène Burnouf (1801-52) whose claim is strongest to being the first true scholar of Buddhism in Europe. Prior to his work all that was known of Buddhism came from Sanskrit polemical writings which branded it as nāstika or heresy on the grounds that it was atheistic and denied a beyond. Burnouf studied the Nepalese Buddhist texts and became aware of the need for a proper historical study of the Northern and Southern traditions, but his early death prevented him from accomplishing more than his L'Introduction à l'histoire du buddhisme indien (1844). He brought to this dispassionate work the European assumption that the most important difference between religious ideologies is their view of God (as one, many, or non-existent), and divided Indian religions accordingly into theistic and atheistic systems. Buddhism he placed on the atheistic side with the Sāṃkhya, and he reasoned that in denying God they made their goal simply complete annihilation. For this he found etymological support when he traced the word 'nirvāṇa' to a compounding of 'nir' with 'vā' which was used in non-philosophical discourse to mean the blowing out of a lamp. However, he stated his conclusions only tentatively and urged that further careful textual study should be carried out.

¹For my account of the earliest European scholars—Burnouf, Saint-Hilaire, Müller, Oldenberg, D'Alwys and Childers—whose books I had no access to I have used G. R. Welbon's book The Buddhist Nirvana and its Western Interpreters (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968) which quotes at sufficient length from these scholars to enable one to assess their contribution. Welbon's study stops at the 1930s and has some notable omissions, for example Grimm's important work which had appeared in fourteen editions by 1926, and Coomaraswamy's valuable book published in 1916.

Burnouf had said enough to spark off a debate in Europe and his friend Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire (b.1805) had less compunction about asserting that Buddhism was nihilistic. Saint-Hilaire was a classicist who seems to have been motivated by a desire to uphold the superiority of Western culture while writing disparagingly about Eastern thought. For example, he describes as follows the belief in transmigration:

The prevailing sentiment of the entire population--no only Buddhist but Brahmanic--is an unappeasable horror of life and all its attendant ills. The idea of transmigration pursues them like a terrifying phantom. At any cost the hideous image must be driven off, and all of Brahmanism was applied to finding a means of deliverance. (Le Bouddha et sa Religion, 1860).¹

This attempt at a psychology of the Indian mind was only one of many put forward by various people to explain how a great world religion could have as its final aim the extinction of individual existence.

Max Müller (b.1823) the pioneer of Sanskrit scholarship in Europe, studied under Burnouf and was deeply influenced by him, although Buddhist studies were only an excursion from his life's work on the Vedas. The goal of Buddhism was for him an irritating paradox because he greatly admired the Buddha for his ethics and his disregard of class barriers and privileges, yet it seemed that his logic expressed in the Four Truths and the doctrine of Causality had driven him into a doctrine of final annihilation: 'Such a religion, we should say, was made for the mad-house,' he wrote, 'but Buddhism was an advance if compared with Brahmanism.'² Müller developed his own theory of how religions come to hold impossible beliefs for which he used the term the 'philosophical myth', that is, a false belief which has become entrenched because of certain inherent weaknesses in language. He believed, however, that this myth was confined to the Abhidhamma and was not present in the earlier strata of the Canon in which he found 'sayings in open contradiction to this Metaphysical Nihilism.'³ The earlier strata, he believed, showed that

¹Quoted in Welbon p.72

²Max Müller Selected Essays II 1881 p.250 ³Ibid. p.302 (Welbon p.124).
Quoted in Welbon p.112.

nirvāṇa was an ineffable, indescribable experience simply characterized as the deathless (amata). He quoted eighteen verses from the Dhammapada which he said could not have been composed under the assumption that nirvāṇa was utter annihilation.¹

In 1871 James D'Alwys, a missionary in Ceylon, published his Buddhist Nirvāṇa: A Review of Max Müller's Dhammapada in which he attacked Müller and asserted that the nihilistic nirvāṇa was the teaching of the whole Pāli Canon and not just the Abhidhamma. He based this conclusion on the observation that the whole Canon teaches that neither a Supreme Being nor an immortal soul exist. The Buddha's silence about the state of an Arahant after death he explained as being because it is hard to say much about nothing! The positive terms used of Nirvāṇa in the Canon refer, he said, to the happiness of one who knows that he has extinguished all craving and will have no further existence.

Robert Childers, a member of the Ceylon Civil Service and, later, professor of Pāli at University College, London, like D'Alwys rejected Müller's explanation of there being two contradictory teachings about nirvāṇa in the Canon in terms of the historical stratification of the texts. The two meanings of nirvāṇa, he said, applied to the state of the Arahant while alive (which was often described as 'bliss' or in some other positive language) and to his annihilation at death. There was no contradiction to be explained.

T. W. Rhys Davids (1843-1922) was also a civil servant in Ceylon and inherited Childers' chair in Pāli. He founded the Pāli Text Society which by the time of his death had issued 94 volumes of texts. Rhys Davids held that Müller, in arguing for a positive view even of the post-mortem nirvāṇa, had taken inadequate account of the centrality of the anattā teaching in relation to the khandhas or five groups of the factors of personality. These groups, argued Rhys Davids, are an exhaustive description of the 'constituent parts and powers of man',

¹Verses 21, 23, 97, 114, 134, 160, 184, 203, 218, 225, 285, 323, 368, 369, 374, 381, 383, 411.

and it is in the nature of all of them, the texts make it abundantly clear, to arise and pass away. Therefore the nibbāna attainable in this life is the only real goal and is not to be thought of as other-worldly or transcendental. Nor was there anything to be annihilated, which is why the Buddha denied that he was an annihilationist, and his silence when asked what became of an Arahant after death was to be explained as the only suitable response to an absurd question. Nibbāna is 'purely and solely an ethical state,' he wrote in his Pāli-English Dictionary (1921-5), 'to be reached in this birth by ethical practices, contemplation and insight. It is therefore not transcendental.' As a wholly this-worldly goal it is to be conceived as emancipation from lust, hatred and illusion.

With Rhys Davids' authority behind it this was virtually the only accepted view by the end of the Nineteenth century. But in order to give nibbāna such a positive ethical connotation Rhys Davids played down a feature of the texts which is everywhere apparent, that is, the strongly positive feeling that is expressed about extinction or the non-arising of any future rebirth. Paradoxically, the early Buddhists seem to have been most positive about the most negative feature of their doctrine! This problem that Rhys Davids succeeded for a time in submerging soon surfaced again.

Meanwhile, on the continent, Hermann Oldenberg (d.1920), although he began in the 1880s with a viewpoint very like Rhys Davids', pursued the question that remained a great enigma of the apparent desire that is expressed in the texts for cessation. Oldenberg had an altogether subtler mind than the blunt and dogmatic Englishmen Childers and Rhys Davids possessed and he penetrated the problem further than anyone else in the Nineteenth century. Our own century has not so much added to his insights as demonstrated why they were correct--not that they have yet won acceptance amongst all scholars by any means, as we shall see.

In his remarkable book published while he was still in his twenties,
Buddha: Sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde (1881), Oldenberg wrote:

The official teaching of the church represented that on the question whether the ego is, whether the perfected saint lives after death or not, the exalted Buddha has taught nothing. . . .
 . . . Our researches must accept this clear and decisive solution to the question, recurring often in the sacred texts, as it is given; it needs no interpretation, and admits of no strained construction. Orthodox teaching in the ancient Order of Buddhists inculcated expressly on its converts to forego the knowledge of the being or non-being of the perfected saint.¹

But he was not content with this--obviously the further question arises of why the repeated question was disallowed. On the one hand the logic of the teachings moves unavoidably to the conclusion: 'The ego is not. Or what is equivalent: the Nirvāṇa is annihilation.'² On the other, this very conclusion of dialectic is forbidden to the disciple. Why? He came to realise that the question does call for interpretation.

The answer he found by searching for the nuances in the texts, for example in the well-known dialogue between Khemā Therī and King Pasenadi:

We shall scarcely be astray in supposing that we discover in this dialogue a marked departure from the sharply defined line to which the course of thought confines itself in the previously quoted conversation between Buddha and Malukya. True, the question as to the eternal duration of the Perfect One is as little answered here as there, but why can it not be answered? The Perfect One's existence is unfathomably deep, like the ocean: it is of a depth which terrestrial human thought with the appliances at its command cannot exhaust. The man who applies to the strictly unconditional predicates such as being and non-being, which are used properly enough of the finite or the conditional, resembles a person who attempts to count the sands of the Ganges or the drops of the ocean.³

He concluded that the answer was a 'Yes--no being in the ordinary sense but still assuredly not a non-being: a sublime positive, of which thought has no idea, for which language has no expression, which beams out to meet the cravings of the thirsty for immortality. . . One who clearly and definitely renounced an everlasting future would speak in another strain.'⁴ Oldenberg reached this conclusion, which is surely the very least that

¹⁻⁴ These quotations all come from Oldenberg's Buddha (1881) pp.274-82, and are quoted by Welbon on pp.201-4 of his book.

must be said about the dialogue mentioned (and also a great many other passages which will be examined in the third chapter of this study), without the benefit of the comparative studies in mysticism which now enable us to identify much more positively the type of utterance that recurs so often in the Pāli texts. These can now be recognized as the utterances typical of the kind of mysticism known as the 'via negativa', of which the most frequently repeated example in the Pāli texts is the teaching of anattā. In this teaching Gotama, taking in turn factors that constitute our personality, says: 'This is not mine, I am not it, it is not my self.' This expression, which recurs countless times throughout the Nikāyas, was evidently Gotama's most frequently repeated utterance. Ironically, it is also his most misunderstood utterance, as George Grimm was the first scholar to realise.

II THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

George Grimm's work, which appeared in the second decade of the century, was, however, ignored by the two most prominent scholars of the nineteen-twenties and thirties, the Belgian Catholic Louis de La Vallée Poussin and the Russian Th. Stcherbatsky. Their work will therefore need to be considered first, in order to show how Buddhist scholarship went stumbling on, taking no notice either of Oldenberg's insights or Grimm's revolutionary perceptions which are only now gaining a little of the respect they deserve.

Louis de La Vallée Poussin (1869-1938) was, like Saint-Hilaire, a professor of Classics for whom Buddhism was a private obsession. He worried over the unsolved problem of nirvāṇa for over forty years and wrote more about it than anyone before or since. Yet he never had a sympathy for Eastern thought. The following passage from his 1916 Hibbert lectures at Oxford shows the attitude of cold distaste for

the subject that he could nevertheless not relinquish:

As a matter of fact we know what nirvāṇa is as well as the Buddhists themselves, and it is not our fault that we are unable to give an unambiguous statement. The Buddhists were satisfied with descriptions which do not satisfy us.

On the one hand, whereas we have been for centuries trained to make our ideas clear, this was not the case with Indians. The historian has not to deal with Latin notions worked out by clear-sighted thinkers, but with Indian 'philosophumena' concocted by the ascetics . . . men exhausted by a severe diet and often stupefied by the practice of ecstasy. Indians do not make a clear distinction between facts and ideas, between ideas and words; they have never clearly recognized the principle of contradiction.¹

The last assertion is nonsense; the Indians have long shown in their treatises on logic that they know very well what contradiction is.

They have also known when and how to use it deliberately as a part of the special figurative language of mysticism. Ironically, this passage is as near as La Vallée Poussin came to perceiving the centrality of mysticism to the problem of the interpretation of nirvāṇa that obsessed him for so long.

The following passage from the same lectures shows the mixture of contempt and serious fascination with which he approached the subject:

Nirvāṇa is looked upon as deliverance, just as a man who is in jail wants only to be free--even so Man does not want to be happy, he only wants to be freed from the miseries of life. That is pessimism.

It is not absolute nihilism, nihilism boldly looked in the face. It is a negative attitude . . . The monk strives for unqualified deliverance; he does not inquire whether deliverance is destruction or a mysterious kind of existence. . . .

Buddhism ends in an act of faith; Śākyamuni will lead us to salvation provided we close our eyes and blindly follow his ordinances. The important thing in Buddhism is not dogma but practice, not the goal, the mysterious and unascertainable Nirvāṇa, but the Path, Sanctity.²

This account of Buddhism as fundamentally pessimistic, but a nihilism not faced up to, to be followed blindly merely as deliverance from birth, disease, old age and death, is not unsubtle like the British version of Childers and Rhys Davids. There is more than a grain of psychological plausibility in the suggestion that human beings may feel like prisoners,

¹Louis de La Vallée Poussin The Way to Nirvāṇa (The Hibbert Lectures for 1916 (Cambridge University Press, 1917) p.111

²Ibid. p.132

unconcerned about what they shall do when they are freed, wanting only not to be where they are--release is enough and preferably an early one for good behaviour! (Suicide, which would do just as well, is the nihilism that is not faced squarely). This is all too close to the truth of what monastic Buddhism became to be dismissed lightly, not least the observation that it was felt to be something not to be questioned but to be followed blindly. As we shall see, the misunderstanding of the teaching of anattā which turned it into a perverse and pointless dogma was followed with a blind literalism in which the sole admirable ingredient was loyalty.

The great merit of La Vallée Poussin's work is that for all his insistence that 'incoherence is one of the chief features of Indian thought',¹ he was never content with his own grasp of the subject while there were texts which defied it. Nine years after the lectures from which we have quoted he wrote in his Foreword to his classic attempt to solve the problem, entitled Nirvāṇa (1925):

Neither was my conviction resolute nor my ideas precise. I should certainly be afraid to re-read the pretentious statements that I have dedicated to nirvāṇa in many articles. And the more recent amongst them are not less bad.²

He now took the approach of the historian of religions, stressing the background from which Buddhism sprang, viewing it no longer as an isolated puzzle but as a branch of yogic mysticism. 'All yogins pursued the same goal by parallel roads,' he wrote, 'but they willingly changed sect and master.'³ Buddhism, he became convinced, preceded the impact of the Upaniṣads, so it could not be viewed as a reaction to the Ātman-Brahman identification. It was, rather, an earlier, non-metaphysical branch of

¹La Vallée Poussin 'Nirvāṇa' in Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh, 1908-26) Vol.IX (1917) p.379a

²La Vallée Poussin Nirvāṇa (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1925) p.xvii quoted in Welbon p.279.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid. p.26, quoted in Welbon p.281

yoga, from which the idea of nirvāṇa derived as 'a basic given', which was 'free from all metaphysical speculation (involved rather in myth than in metaphysics). Nirvāṇa is an invisible abode into which the saint--often amid the flames of a sort of apotheosis--disappears.'¹ It was an immortality which was 'declared to be ineffable',² and which bore no ontological relationship to the world of suffering, transmigrating beings.

The Russian scholar Th. Stcherbatsky was outraged at the turn that La Vallée Poussin's thought had taken because he cherished the idea that Buddhism originated not as a practical form of yoga but as a purely philosophical enterprise:

Between the Materialists who denied retribution and the Eternalists who imagined a return to a pure spiritual condition Buddha took a middle course. . . . The originality of the Buddha's position consisted in denying substantiality altogether and converting the world-process into a concerted appearance of discrete and evanescent elements. Forsaking the monism of the Brahmanists and the dualism of the Sāṅkhyas, he established a system of the most radical pluralism. That the essence and the starting point of Buddhism were speculative appears very clearly if we give credit to the records about the other wandering teachers who were the contemporaries of the Buddha and often engaged in controversies with him. The questions at issue between them were of a speculative nature.³

The difference between the two scholars lay in which sources they respected. La Vallée Poussin was examining the sūtra literature of Buddhism, while Stcherbatsky maintained that the true and original Buddhism was to be found in the śāstra literature, and he waved aside the question of which was more historically authentic as the teachings of Gotama:

Accuracy is indeed not to be found at all in the Pāli Canon. Accuracy is not its aim. It is misleading to seek accuracy there. Accuracy is to be found in later works, in works belonging to the śāstra class. All Buddhist literature is divided into a sūtra and a śāstra class. The first is popular, the second is scientific. The first is propaganda, the second is precision.⁴

Obviously, Stcherbatsky's criterion of 'accuracy' was not historical but

¹La Vallée Poussin Nirvāṇa (1925) p.57, quoted in Welbon p.283

²Ibid.

³Th. Stcherbatsky The Conception of Buddhist Nirvana (1927) pp.3-4

⁴Th. Stcherbatsky 'The Doctrine of the Buddha' in Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies VI (1930-2) p.868, quoted in Welbon p.292

philosophical. It is still question-begging to claim that the sāstras reported the true thoughts of the Buddha if the issue of historical accuracy is swept aside in this cavalier way. Stcherbatsky's book The Central Conception of Buddhism (1923) takes as its principal source the Abhidharmakośa of Vasubandhu, which stands in relation to the actual dialogues of the Buddha as a systematic exposition of a commentary on the commentarial literature of one early sect of Buddhism! This makes it difficult to take seriously his claim that the starting point of Buddhism was speculative and that the original position of the Buddha was annihilationist. He expresses this position as follows:

The picture of the universe which suggested itself to the mental eye of the Buddha represented thus an infinite number of separate evanescent entities in a state of beginningless commotion, but gradually steering to quiescence and to an absolute annihilation of all life, when its elements have been brought one after another to a complete standstill. . . . The Buddhist could promise nothing else but quiescence of life and its final annihilation, a result which, taken by itself, was not very remote from what was offered by simple materialism. The latter promised annihilation after every life. Buddha promised likewise annihilation but after a long series of efforts in virtue and concentrated meditation.¹

This conviction about the nature of early Buddhism led Stcherbatsky to contrast it with the development of the Mahāyāna, with the aid of some rhetorical sleight of hand, in what is surely the most memorable of all sentences in the scholarly literature:

When we see an atheistic, soul-denying philosophic teaching of a path to personal Final Deliverance consisting in an absolute extinction of life and a simple worship of the memory of its founder,--when we see it superseded by a magnificent High Church with a Supreme God, surrounded by a numerous pantheon and a host of Saints, a religion highly devotional, highly ceremonious and clerical, with an ideal of Universal Salvation of all living creatures, a Salvation by the divine grace of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, a Salvation not in annihilation but in eternal life,--we are fully justified in maintaining that the history of religions has scarcely witnessed such a break between new and old within the pale of what nevertheless continues to claim common descent from the same religious founder.²

The remarkable discontinuity that Stcherbatsky thought he saw is not,

¹Th. Stcherbatsky The Conception of Buddhist Nirvāṇa (Varanasi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, no date supplied, original publication 1927) pp.5-6

²Ibid. p.59

it should be noted, between the Buddhism of the Pāli Canon and of the equivalent Mahāyāna texts, but between the most abstract parts of early Theravādin philosophy and popular Mahāyāna religion. The contrast is drawn between two incommensurate things. There is no such radical discontinuity between the Buddhism of the Pāli Nikāyas and that of the Prajñā-pāramitā and Mādhyamika literature, as T. R. V. Murti has shown in his book The Central Philosophy of Buddhism (1955) which, incidentally, borrows its title from Stcherbatsky.

A discontinuity of an earlier and different kind was argued by George Grimm (1868-1945) who is the dark horse of early Buddhist studies. His work has been scorned or neglected in the English-speaking world, although he gained recognition in Germany, where, for example, Neumann, the pioneer scholar of Buddhism in that country who died in the year that Grimm's The Doctrine of the Buddha appeared (1915), said: 'The work is undoubtedly the most important exposition of Buddhism since Oldenberg's book. Nevertheless it is incomparably deeper and more comprehensive.'¹ Other leading German scholars such as Zimmermann and Seidenstücker also agreed with Grimm's radical reinterpretation of early Buddhism. Edward Conze, late in his career, came out in Grimm's defence, saying: 'The more I am concerned with these things, the more convinced I become that George Grimm's interpretation of the Buddhist theory of ātman comes nearest to the original teaching of the Buddha.'² Even a very prominent Therāvadin scholar from Sri Lanka, A. P. Buddhadatta, agreed that Grimm 'was the recoverer of the old genuine doctrine of the Buddha which has been submerged.' Ordinary people who came to the Buddha, however, understood him, Buddhadatta maintains: 'They could easily understand when the Buddha preached that "your body, mind, etc. are not you or yours, therefore cling not to them, give them up . . . and so on,"' whereas, he says, 'When we

¹ George Grimm The Doctrine of the Buddha (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag 1958, originally published in 1915, tr. into English 1926) Preface, p.12

² Quoted from the dust-jacket of George Grimm Buddhist Wisdom: the Mystery of the Self (Delhi: Motilal Barnarsidas no date given)

read our Pāli texts and the commentaries, we get the idea that Buddhism is a kind of Nihilism.'¹.

This statement by Buddhadatta gives the essence of Grimm's reinterpretation. Grimm is really the hero of this study because he had the nerve to go back to the simple and direct meaning of the teachings attributed to Gotama, without viewing them as everyone else has done through the distorting lens of the Theravādin interpretation. In essence what Grimm said is that it is a misunderstanding that the Buddha taught that there is no self; all that he said was that the perishable body and mind are not the self. Always in the texts the denial of self refers merely to what is impermanent in man, which the Buddha analysed in terms of five groups (the khandhas) which he called the 'groups of grasping'. It is important, Grimm argued, to realize why these aspects of our temporal personality were called this: it is because we imagine that they are all that we are. We cling to the khandhas because we think that they are all that we consist in, 'as if a man with hands smeared with resin caught hold of a twig' (A IV 178). It was precisely in order to persuade us that the khandhas are not all that we are that the Buddha repeated so often the words: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.' The great irony is that within a few centuries he was taken to mean that the khandhas are an exhaustive analysis of all that we are, and that therefore the repudiation of the khandhas as containing a self means that we have no self or attā.

As we shall see in the third chapter of this study, there is no good evidence that Gotama denied the existence of the attā, which is by definition the permanent essence of personality. All that the texts say is that the khandhas cannot be this permanent essence because our experience tells us that they are changing and perishable. But the problem does arise of why

¹George Grimm The Doctrine of the Buddha Preface, p.9

Gotama did not affirm the attā in clear, unmistakeable terms. Why did he confine himself to statements about suffering and impermanence and the need to escape them? The answers are not simple, as it will be seen in the last chapter of this study, but George Grimm addressed himself to the problem and suggested reasons for the Buddha's silence which, we shall argue, are basically correct. He maintained that the great Buddhist hope was that whatever it is that suffers and is impermanent is not of our essence. Only if this is true can there be release from suffering, as distinct from mere annihilation--which Gotama emphatically denied that he taught. Consequently the entire emphasis of Buddhism was placed on grasping the truths of the impermanence, suffering and soullessness of all conditioned existence (the so-called 'three marks' of all existence), in order to enable us to 'see through, as it were, the realm of the not-self, in its quality as not our Self.'¹

Why, if the truth of Grimm's interpretation is so luminously obvious, did the English and French scholars ignore it? The question is puzzling, but it may be that the French still felt the influence of Burnouf and Saint-Hilaire, while the British-based Pāli Text Society was so immersed in the Theravādin commentarial literature that it never occurred to them that it might be mistaken. The British, too, have tended to be less sympathetic to mysticism than the Germans and perhaps therefore more ready to view the Buddha as only an empiricist. A further strength of the Germans was their depth of background knowledge about the different strands of Indian religion and thought, compared to the English who tried to proceed in a vacuum in their attempt to understand the Pāli texts. Certainly, the English would have been offended by the long digressions of Schopenhauerian-style philosophising which interrupt Grimm's argument.

In fact, one English scholar, no less than the wife of the great T. W. Rhys Davids--after his death--made her own off-beat reinterpretation

¹George Grimm The Doctrine of the Buddha p.146

of the Pāli texts. It is to her great credit that she perceived the inadequacy and psychological implausibility of the version of Buddhism that Childers and T. W. Rhys Davids had propagated, but what she put in its place was, if anything, even more wide of the mark. The 'original gospel' of Śākyamuni, she maintained, exists only in fragments scattered through the Pāli Canon which is for the most part the work of a monk-dominated institutional Buddhism. The original gospel was neither world-negating nor atheistic and its goal was not nibbāna (extinction) but attha (a word which simply means 'the goal' or 'that which is advantageous'). It is true that this word is used in the texts in place of nibbāna fairly frequently, but Mrs Rhys Davids' attempts to define it do not inspire confidence:

. . . The word is positive, not a negation. It is that which is sought for, is to be won. It is not something that is NOT. Lastly, it is not something which having won, a man judges to be so 'void' that he cannot value. It is ever true as being that which man, in seeking, ever figures as the Best, the Most he can yet conceive.¹

In turning Buddhism into a positive, humanistic 'folk-gospel', Mrs Rhys Davids had to assert that most of what has come down to us as the utterances of Gotama are 'monkish gibberish'. She tended to accept one part of a sutta as original and reject another as inauthentic on the sole grounds that it was not in accordance with her conception of the founder of a 'great religion' to have denied the reality of self or to have made extinction his goal.

The point of view that is argued in this study does not involve cutting up the texts in this way, although it must be acknowledged that Mrs Rhys Davids identified some genuine stratification in the texts. Grimm's reinterpretation, and the more thorough defense of it by Pérez-Remón which is discussed at the end of this chapter, depend not on being selective with texts but on a complete reassessment of their meaning as a whole body of literature. There is remarkably little that needs to be

¹C. A. F. Rhys Davids Wayfarer's Words II (London: Luzac & Co. 1941) p.654

explained in terms of the later monkish over-writing of the Pāli texts, as distinct from the monkish misinterpretation of them which is implied by Grimm's thesis. But the latter does not make its appearance in the Sutta Piṭaka so much as in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka which is the first true Theravādin product. The suttas recorded in Pāli appear to have come from the common stock of remembered dialogues of Gotama and his early disciples which circulated in all of the early schools of Buddhism. Although there are discernible strata within parts of the Sutta Piṭaka, on the whole the material exhibits great consistency.

Ananda Coomaraswamy, whose book Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism was published a year after Grimm's, in 1916, came within an ace of hitting upon the same theory. He noticed the profound similarities of the goal of nibbāna to the Upaniṣadic Brahman, and the similarity of these to other mystical goals: 'What are Mokṣa to the Brahmin, Tao to the Chinese mystic, Fanā to the Sūfi, 'Eternal Life' to the followers of Jesus, that is nibbāna to the Buddhist,'¹ he wrote, and quoted the evidence of the Chandogya Upaniṣad (8: 15: 1): '... as the highset goal there opens before them the eternal, perfect Nirvānam.' Since the aims were so similar he concluded that the Buddhists had simply not heard of the Ātman-Brahman identification:

There is nothing then to show that the Buddhists ever really understood the pure doctrine of the Ātman which is 'not so, not so'. The attack which they led upon the idea of soul or self is directed against the conception of the eternity in time of an unchanging individuality; of the timeless spirit they do not speak, and yet they claim to have disposed of the theory of the Ātman! In reality both sides were in agreement that the soul or ego (manas, ahamkāra, viññāna, etc.) is complex and phenomenal, while of that which is 'not so' we know nothing. Buddhist dialectic, by the simile of the chariot and so forth is directed to show that things are 'Empty'; when their component elements are recognized there is no remainder but only the 'Void'; he who realises this attains Nibbāna and is freed. But we cannot distinguish between this 'Void' or 'Abyss' and the Brahman which is 'No thing'.²

Coomaraswamy noticed an important absence in the early texts of any real

¹Ananda K. Coomaraswamy Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism (New York: University Books, 1969 [1916]) p.115

²Ibid. pp.199-200

dialogue between Gotama and believers in the Upaniṣadic Ātman: 'Those whom he defeats in controversy so easily are mere puppets who never put forward the doctrine of the unconditioned Self at all. Gautama meets no foeman worthy of his steel, and for this reason the greater part of the Buddhist polemic is unavoidably occupied in beating the air.'¹ He goes on to say: '. . . that Ātman of which it is said 'That art thou' is neither the body nor the individual 'soul' . . . but like the future state of the Arhat it lies on the other side of experience, invisible, unutterable and unfathomable.'² The Ātman of the Upaniṣads, says Coomaraswamy, 'is precisely that which does not transmigrate,' and he quotes in evidence the Gītā: '"That" is never born and never dies' (ii, 22). This means that Gotama's attack on the Ātman is beside the point, as if the compilers of the Dialogues merely wished to represent him as victorious in argument and set up a straw man for him to knock down: 'Coining the term an-attā to imply the absence of a perduring individuality is a triumph of ingenuity, but the perduring Ātman of Vedānta is not any sort of individuality anyway.'³

Implied here is a view not very different from Mrs Rhys Davids', i.e. that the anattā doctrine in the texts is a later monkish invention and was not original to Gotama. They both came remarkably close to the view which is taken in the present study and is a growing minority opinion amongst scholars, the main difference being that it is not a monkish invention that gave rise to the Theravādin conception of anattā but a monkish misconstruction placed upon the authentic teaching which remains available to us in the Nikāyas. It shows just how much dust the Theravādins have managed to throw in the scholars' eyes that Coomaraswamy, whose insight is so penetrating into the real nature of the Buddhist teaching, was unable to read the texts in the fresh way that Grimm did.

¹Ananda Coomaraswamy Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism p.200

²Ibid. p.202

³Ibid. p.203

III THE LAST FIFTY YEARS

Between the early 1930s and the 1950s there is something of a gap in Buddhist scholarly work of any great interest, after the appearance of E. J. Thomas's History of Buddhist Thought (1933) and his earlier The Life of Buddha as History and Legend (1927). Like Coomaraswamy, Thomas observed the fact that the neuter Brahman appeared to be unknown to the compilers of the Pāli Canon. He noted, too, that 'Even in the Brahmajāla sutta, where all the heresies are supposed to be included, there is no denial of an ātman,' but took it to be 'implicit' in the scheme of the khandhas that there is a 'denial of something else called an ātman.'¹ Nevertheless, it remains a mere deduction and not something we can say is definitely asserted that there is no ātman. As for nibbāna, Thomas took a view similar to Müller's, Oldenberg's and Coomaraswamy's:

Existence (bhava) for them depended upon knowledge obtained through the six senses, except for the knowledge of the permanent attained at enlightenment. They recognized the individual as consisting of elements perceptible to the senses. They had before them the question as to what becomes of him when everything that can be predicated of him is withdrawn. What the clairvoyants and spiritualists can tell us of discarnate spirits is of no help here. That is merely about existence in another plane of the universe. The Buddhists had reached the conception of a state of which neither existence nor non-existence as we know it could be asserted. . . . everything is withdrawn by which anything can be asserted. He who is released is "profound, immeasurable, hard to fathom, like the great ocean". And if the disciples refused to assert anything, they were not being agnostics or eel-wrigglers, but were merely thinking clearly and refusing to express the inexpressible.²

It has already been mentioned that T. R. V. Murti countered the view that there is any real discontinuity between early Buddhism and the philosophy of the Mahāyāna, which is why he could call his book The Central Philosophy of Buddhism (1955). He took a view similar to Thomas's and quotes approvingly the above passage, adding that the Buddha was well acquainted with the different speculations, all of

¹Edward J. Thomas The History of Buddhist Thought 2d ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951) pp.98-9

²Ibid. p.128

which he characterised as dogmatism and consistently refused to be drawn into the net. This was because he was alive to the insuperable difficulties in 'conceiving the Transcendent in terms of the empirical':

The utter inability to relate and characterise the Unconditioned in terms of the phenomenal is the reason why the questions about the Tathāgata and others cannot be answered outright. Dogmatists invariably confound the Transcendent with the empirical. They take the rūpa, vedanā, viññāna etc. to be the self. The Tathāgata on the other hand, does not take these to be the self, nor the self to have the rūpa, nor the rūpa in the self, nor the self in the rūpa. Deeply conscious of the empirical nature of these categories, the Tathāgata does not indulge in such unwarranted extensions; he does not spin speculative theories. He has realised that the Real is transcendent to thought.¹

Where both Thomas and Murti differ from Grimm and Pérez-Remón is in holding back from the proposition that the Buddha implied the reality of the attā as a name for the transcendent itself. Nothing in what Murti says here ought to be any obstacle to saying this much, since it does not imply that the Buddha made any positive assertions about the nature of the attā. The thesis of Grimm and Pérez-Remón is that the Buddha defined the attā only negatively, for the very reasons that Murti here identifies, in the utterances that take the form: 'the self is not in the rūpa, etc.' To acquiesce in the Theravādin view, as Murti does, that 'self' here is unreal, makes the utterances fall quite flat rhetorically and logically. For all their acuity, Thomas and Murti have not been able to remove their Theravādin spectacles.

In the 1950s another Indian scholar G. C. Pande published a huge, extremely learned but badly organized and scrappy book entitled Studies in the Origins of Buddhism (1957). Apart from some valuable detailed work on the stratification of the Pāli suttas and on the Vedic background, there is a very detailed chapter on Nirvāṇa. In it Pande gives hundreds of citations from the texts which tend to show that the goal was conceived

¹T. R. V. Murti The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Mādhyamika System (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd. 1955) pp.44-5

by the early Buddhists as a 'transcendent, ultimate reality which is changeless, beyond death, beyond thought or measure, resting on nothing else, and that which is the most worthwhile goal.' The terms, says Pande, which can be translated as 'cessation', 'disappearance', or 'extinction', were 'only intended to negate the phenomenal.'¹ The items destroyed in nirvāṇa were only ignorance and passion, craving and impulses, misery and the 'five groups of grasping', i.e. the khandhas. Nirvāṇa is beyond the elements and words fall back from it, yet it is the supreme bliss. 'In nirvāṇa the fluctuations of viññāṇa (consciousness) cease; it is released from accidental impurities and rests in its own natural infinity and luminosity.'² As for the denial of self, 'What is denied is that anything within the impermanent world may be the attā. . . Why? Because it was a death-blow to the source of the deepest worldly attachment.'³

These observations Pande makes entirely on the basis of texts from the Pāli Nikāyas, but he goes on to survey the history of the views of the different early schools of Buddhism (of which there were eighteen) and concludes:

This survey shows that hardly ever did the Buddhists regard nirvāṇa as just the blank of annihilation. Even the Sautrāntikas generally admitted the survival of a subtle spiritual consciousness. . . . The schools, further, agree that since nirvāṇa presents no particularising traits, it is impossible to express it properly in speech; it can only be intuited. Finally, it is the ultimate Good, the end of all restlessness and striving. We may generalise and say that the Buddhist conception of nirvāṇa always includes that of eternal and ineffable peace.⁴

The Theravāda school, Pande says, 'throughout its long history, consistently held nirvāṇa to be positive, experienceable, indescribable and supreme--the most worthwhile.'⁵ This is a conclusion which we shall demonstrate in detail in the next chapter to be almost entirely correct. The single exception that I have been able to find is David Kalupahana, a contemporary Theravādin scholar who has become enamoured of modern Western empiricism and takes a view of the early teaching similar to that of T. W. Rhys Davids.

¹Govind Chandra Pande Studies in the Origins of Buddhism (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1957) p.479

²Ibid. p.494 ³Ibid. p.502 ⁴Ibid. p.451 ⁵Ibid. p.445

In 1958 there appeared one of the more important books in the study of Indian thought generally, Mircea Eliade's Yoga, Immortality and Freedom, in which there is a valuable chapter on Buddhism linking it more clearly than has been done before to the long tradition of Yoga in India. The Buddhist texts, Eliade shows, indicate that Gotama was well grounded in the doctrines of Sāṃkhya and the practices of Yoga, even if he is portrayed as having progressed beyond them:

Naturally, the majority of the canonical texts allege an irreducible distance between the Enlightened One and his masters and contemporaries. This is a polemical position, which requires rectification. The Buddha himself proclaimed that he had 'seen the ancient way and followed it.' (M I 164ff.) The 'ancient', timeless way was that of liberation, of nondeath, and it was also the way of Yoga.¹

On the question of whether the Buddha denied the attā Eliade takes a position like that of Thomas and Murti, stopping short of asserting as Grimm did that Gotama never denied the attā but defined it only in terms of what it is not. Nevertheless, Eliade comes very close to Grimm's position when he writes:

If he took over the pitiless analysis to which preclassic Sāṃkhya and Yoga submitted the notion of 'person' and of psychomental life, it was because the 'Self' had nothing to do with that illusory entity, the human 'soul'. But the Buddha went even further than Sāṃkhya and Yoga, for he declined to postulate the existence of a purusa or an ātman. Indeed he denied the possibility of discussing any absolute principle, as he denied the possibility of having an even approximate experience of the true Self, so long as man was not 'awakened'.²

Here Eliade is trying to have his cake and eat it, with regard to the concept of the attā, reflecting the confusion that hangs over this whole subject. When he capitalises 'Self' he means that the attā was affirmed by Gotama, as Grimm maintained, but then he turns full about and says that the Buddha 'declined to postulate the existence of an . . . ātman.' We can not have it both ways. Surely Grimm's answer is the only way out of this confusion: the Buddha defined the attā or ātman only negatively, but in doing so he meant to leave us in no doubt that the Self exists and it is the goal of the spiritual life.

¹Mircea Eliade Yoga, Immortality and Freedom (Princeton University Press, 1969, originally published in 1958) p.162

²Ibid. p.163

Eliade, however, goes on to make it quite clear that the Buddha was not denying a reality beyond this perishable world which human beings can know and participate in—which is, after all, precisely what the ātman means in Indian mystical thought:

More careful analysis shows that the Buddha rejected all contemporary philosophies and asceticisms because he regarded them as idola mentis interposing a sort of screen between man and absolute reality, the one true Unconditioned. That he had no intention of denying a final unconditioned reality, beyond the eternal flux of cosmic and psychomental phenomena, but that he was careful to speak but little on the subject, is proved by a number of canonical texts. Nirvāṇa is the absolute in the highest sense, the asamskrta--that is, what is neither born nor composed, what is irreducible, transcendent, beyond all human experience. . . . Nirvāṇa can be 'seen' only with the 'eye of the saints' (ariya cakku)--that is, with a transcendent 'organ' which no longer participates in the perishable world.¹

Given all this, it makes no sense at all to assert that the Buddha denied the reality of the ātman. All that he could possibly have denied was some people's conception of the ātman, or, that the perishable aspects of our personality are the ātman. Nothing proves he denied an inner reality, call it an 'organ' or whatever, capable of experiencing the transcendent. Surely, all that can be said is that the Buddha did not choose to make use of the metaphor of 'Self' in a positive way in order to point to this 'beyond', but confined himself to speaking of what the Self is not--which is surely still a use of the metaphor. The important difference is that it is not a use of the metaphor of 'Self' which invites speculation, but one suited perfectly to the practical, experimental approach that is the Buddhist path. To concentrate on what is not the Self is to get on with the task of winning detachment from all that is perishable and painful. Who is it that becomes detached, if there is no Self? 'Self' is the great Indian metaphor for the transcendent that is more than a metaphor—it is the kind of symbol identified by Tillich which participates in the reality to which it gives expression. If Gotama denied the reality of the Self it can only mean that he was a sceptic of the claims of the mystics that there is a transcendent reality in which we can participate. This is

¹ Mircea Eliade Yoga, Immortality and Freedom p.164

just what many scholars still think, some of them very capable linguists with a great mastery of detail as we shall see. The viewpoint of Thomas, Murti, Pande and Eliade has by no means yet won the day, while the even greater challenge to the scholarly establishment represented by Grimm and Pérez-Remón (and the present small study) has hardly yet entered the field.

A. K. Warder is the most senior of these contemporary scholars who have taken the completely negative or 'extinction only' view of nibbāna, basing it on the belief that the Buddha denied the reality of the attā of the mystics, i.e. the transcendental self. Like the other scholars whom we shall go on to discuss who have taken the 'simple' view of Buddhism--repeating old mistakes, it is tempting to say--Warder suffers from a narrowness of focus and lacks the depth of contextual knowledge of Indian thought and religion that the older scholars like La Vallée Poussin had acquired. Yet he has written a standard text-book in Pāli and his work is highly meticulous, for example he has made a study of the metre in verse passages in the suttas in order to assist the process of arranging the texts into their proper strata in the development of the Canon. His large study entitled Indian Buddhism (1970), however, resembles his Pāli text-book in that it is hard to believe that the ideas expounded in the one or the language in the other were ever those of living human beings. Inconsistencies and nuances in the texts do not exist for him; the texts which fit his nihilistic view of Buddhism are dragooned into perfect logical formation and the unfit simply ignored.

Yet his kind of mind was undoubtedly a shaping force in the compiling of the suttas themselves. There is nothing new about the rationalism with which he approaches the material--one of the early schools, the Sautrāntikas, took a similar point of view of the Buddha's teaching and firmly believed they were adhering to the very letter of it, hence their name. Rationalism always wishes to eliminate the mystical. Warder's

work is a useful reminder that the texts can be read consistently from the purely negative point of view, provided it is always assumed that when they speak of suffering and impermanence and the not-self they are then referring to all that exists (rather than merely to conditioned existence in the phenomenal world). Warder does assume this, as the following passage about the reason for the Buddha's refusal to say whether or not the Perfected One exists after death illustrates:

As there is no continuing being, which would be tantamount to a soul, the alternatives do not apply. . . There is no being, or 'thus-gone', which exists or is destroyed at death. There is only the sequence of conditions, the cycle of the universe so conditioned.¹

Here Warder is supplying us with a premise which is never stated in the texts, i.e. that there is only the sequence of conditions which are described in the paticcasamuppāda or chain of causality. Without this premise, which is nowhere even hinted at--quite the contrary--in the vast number and variety of texts in the Sutta Pitaka, Warder's argument crumbles. The premise is a rationalist or empiricist superimposition on the texts.

Rune Johansson (b.1918), who like Warder has written a text-book for students of Pāli, is a psychologist working for Swedish Defence Research and has written two books on psychological aspects of early Buddhism: The Psychology of Nirvāṇa (1969) and The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism (1979). He is a subtle writer who is very attentive to detail and brings out features of the subject that have been overlooked in the past, but he has virtually no knowledge of the context in Indian thought of what he is discussing. His view of nibbāna is determined by his amateur interest in therapeutic psychology, so that he views it as 'the solution to a problem'. Nibbāna, he says, is 'freedom of the personality . . . freedom from the personal compulsions, obsessions and inhibitions that make a realistic, purposeful way of life impossible.'² The most common context of the word

¹ A. K. Warder Indian Buddhism (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1970) p.125

² Rune Johansson The Psychology of Nirvāṇa (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd. 1969) p.32

'nibbāna', he points out, is the progressive series of which it is the climax: 'This monklife leads to complete detachment, to freedom from craving, to cessation, to peace, to superknowledge, to the highest insight, to nibbāna.' The word is also frequently associated with coolness (with all that means in a tropical country), with pleasure, release, health, peace, happiness, security, kindness and freedom from disease. As if to clinch his case that nibbāna is the goal of a therapy, he points out what is undoubtedly true, that 'the most important aspect of nibbāna is the destruction of the obsessions.' This does not mean, he insists, 'complete absence of motivation, nor passivity. The active and energetic frame of mind is frequently mentioned in descriptions of arahants.'¹ Nibbāna is, very simply, psychological health in this life, replacing the motivation of obsession, anger and hatred with that of understanding, friendliness and compassion. It is fundamentally a transformation of the personality, by which Johansson means 'the deeper layers of consciousness and the centre of personality,' which he argues is denoted in the texts by the word 'citta'.²

Johansson can see no justification in the texts for taking nibbāna to refer to any transcendent reality. His view is an ethical one like that of T. W. Rhys Davids, but given a modern psychological ring:

The new, transformed state of citta is nibbāna: a state of fulfilment in which all needs and emotions have gone, a state of calm contentment and of complete intellectual insight. It is a state of internal freedom, where all insecurity, dependence and defence have disappeared. Ethical behaviour has become second nature, and the attitude towards others is friendliness, acceptance and humility.³

Yet he goes on to say that the texts indicate that there was thought to be no essential difference in the Arahant's consciousness before and after death, asserting: 'It is fairly well documented that the citta was thought

¹Rune Johansson The Psychology of Nirvāna p.29

²Ibid. p.36

³Ibid. p.131

to survive death,' (that is, the death of the arahant). Other texts 'prove', says Johansson, that the Tathāgata was thought to continue existing in some form after death just as the 'immeasurable, unfathomable ocean' to which he is often compared certainly exists.¹ Thus, although he denies that nibbāna is transcendent, Johansson also denies the pure extinctionist point of view to be correct.²

A recent scholar who does still take the pure extinctionist point of view is John Garrett Jones, whose book Tales and Teachings of the Buddha (1979) compares the ethical, social and doctrinal aspects of the 'tales' (Jataka stories) and 'teachings' (suttas). John Jones, who supervised my thesis and greatly stimulated my thinking, emphasizes the anattā teaching: 'Gotama's way of release,' he writes, 'consisted in the profound realisation of anattā. Once one was convinced that one had no soul or enduring self, samsāra lost its sting because there was no longer anyone to be reborn.'³ Nibbāna is simply cessation of the impermanent 'pseudo-self' and one's final death 'would be no ordinary death because it would be the prelude to no other life of any sort whatever.'⁴ Gotama had decisively rejected 'the Hindu doctrine of moksha or mukti (release by realising the unity of ātman and brahman) on the ground that this doctrine was based on speculative theories for which there was no basis'⁵ Accordingly, Jones sharply rejects the transcendental view of nibbāna:

It has frequently been maintained that nibbāna is in fact something more positive than this, a kind of blissful, transcendent state of being which can only be known in experience and which is quite unamenable to any kind of description. If this is the case, I can find no basis for it in the Four Nikāyas. So far as I am aware, there is not one word in the Four Nikāyas which lends support to the idea of nibbāna as some positive, transcendent state of bliss. If Gotama intended nibbāna to have such a meaning, it would be hard to explain why he was so reluctant to say so and even harder to see what basis such a meaning would have in the rest of his teaching.⁶

¹ Rune Johansson The Psychology of Nirvāna pp.60-2

² Arvind Sharma made a brief, unconvincing attempt to answer Johansson on the subject of the permanence of the citta in 'Rune Johansson's Analysis of citta: a Criticism' in the Journal of the International Association for Buddhist Studies Vol.4 No.1, 1981 pp.101-7

³⁻⁶ John Garrett Jones Tales and Teachings of the Buddha pp.150-2

This passage shows how differently the texts can appear to different people: whereas for Jones 'not one word' in the whole of the Four Nikāyas supports the transcendental view of the goal, for the writer of the present study not one word fails to do so.

Another recent study which takes the same negative point of view as Jones does, and bases this similarly on the non-existence of an ātman, is Pratap Chandra's Metaphysics of Perpetual Change: the Concept of Self in Early Buddhism (1978). He finds in the Pāli Nikāyas 'an emphasis on perpetual change, on continuous becoming, to the total exclusion of any fixed entity whatsoever.'¹ But early Buddhism was not pessimistic, he says, because although it is painful to be part of a reality in which nothing stays the same for two consecutive moments the malady is curable, 'and that too by an individual's own efforts rather than by the whims of divine grace.'² The cure is complete extinction, although Chandra does not say so in so many words--strong medicine for the sickness in question! But the conclusion follows from the absence of an attā in what Chandra views as not so much a religion as a tough-minded empiricist philosophy:

To the Buddha goes the credit for viewing the self dynamically for the first time in human history. As a realist, he could hardly deny the reality of the psycho-physical continuum. As a responsible leader of the masses, he could hardly deny karma and transmigration. But as a thinker who shunned speculative imagination, he could certainly deny metaphysical status to the psycho-physical series, which is all that is connoted by the term 'self' in early Buddhism. The middle path clearly signifies the acceptance of self as it is found in experience, but not of an imaginary one invented for the purpose of escaping the rigours of existence.³

Early Buddhism, says Chandra, 'set the greatest store by empirical values, personal conviction and realistic analysis. Speculative imagination had hardly any place in early Buddhist thinking,' which is why it taught the 'absence or unreality of a permanent, immutable and blissful self.'⁴ In the absence of such a self, 'Deliverance signified nothing more than

¹Pratap Chandra Metaphysics of Perpetual Change: the Concept of Self in Early Buddhism (Bombay: Somaiya Publications Pvt. Ltd 1978) p.24

²Ibid. p.26

³Ibid. p.166

⁴Ibid. pp.164-5

the stopping of the series of existence.'¹ We shall encounter exactly this point of view again in the next chapter in the section about modern Theravādin views of nibbāna--David Kalupahana also views his own tradition as a foreshadowing of modern, atheistic empiricism. Clearly, this is one way of construing the Buddha's ban on all speculation. The other way is to see it as a refusal to indulge in futile theorising about the ineffable or transcendent reality, an attitude that is not incompatible with the realism and empiricism that Chandra quite rightly draws attention to in the texts.

In 1980 Joaquín Pérez-Remón's big book Self and Non-Self in Early Buddhism appeared. No scholarly evaluation of it has yet come out in the journals, but it can be said with no uncertainty that it is the most substantial and detailed work of linguistic scholarship on the Pāli Nikāyas that has yet been carried out, being an exhaustive study of every relevant and problematic text in which the self is mentioned.¹ When the work of this brilliant Spanish scholar (who carried out his research in Bombay) is eventually recognized, its impact will be revolutionary in Buddhist studies—and have troublesome reverberations in the Theravāda Buddhist communities—because of the sheer weight of evidence and force of argument that is brought to the defence of the position taken by George Grimm in 1916 (and by a few scholars since who did not take the trouble to make out a proper case for it). Whereas Grimm almost buried his insights under a mass of Schopenhauerian speculation, Pérez-Remón writes in a very spare and direct style and devotes all of his space to dissecting the meanings of words and sentences in the Pāli and reassessing how they should be translated into English and the resulting message construed.

Because Pérez-Remón's work is so detailed and so radical in its implications, it is not easy to assess. The present study is an attempt,

¹Pratap Chandra The Metaphysics of Perpetual Change p.204

²Only Pande's study, which has been mentioned, and Jayatilleke's which will receive attention in the next chapter, deal with the texts in comparable depth and detail.

as it was said in the Introduction, to evaluate three things which bear on whether or not Pérez-Remón is right: firstly, what the weight of scholarly opinion is on both sides of the question (which the present chapter has been about); secondly, the puzzling question of just *where* and why the Theravādin tradition came to misinterpret its own scriptures, as it must have done if the thesis is correct; and, finally, the Pāli texts themselves, plainly, had to be read afresh in order to see how plausible the interpretation really is. Thus, although Pérez-Remón's book did not come to hand until towards the end of my research for this study, the study has effectively been turned into a response to it.

The essence of Pérez-Remón's argument is stated in the sentence from his conclusion which poses the question: 'If the self was no reality what sense did it make to establish the fact that something was not the self as the impelling motive to discard it, to get rid of it, to work for its utter cessation?'¹ The logic of this question penetrates very deeply into the accumulated misunderstandings of the Theravādin tradition and of the Western scholarly tradition which read the Pāli texts through the distorting lens of Theravādin doctrine. Whereas Mrs Rhys Davids hypothesized that the contradictory coexistence of many texts affirming the attā and texts asserting anattā in the Canon meant that the latter must be a later development—a 'pitiful monk-wail'—Pérez-Remón is able to show that this is an entirely unnecessary inference. All that the monks did was to misunderstand what were, after all, baffling utterances of their master.

The misunderstanding consisted, essentially, in taking anattā in an absolute sense, rather than a relative one; as Pérez-Remón says of anattā, 'it does not deny the reality of the self in an absolute way but limits itself to the denial of selfhood regarding the empirical factors as a motive for their rejection.'² This, Pérez-Remón believes, was well enough

¹Joaquín Pérez-Remón Self and Non-Self in Early Buddhism (The Hague, Mouton Publishers, 1980) p.303

²Ibid. p.302

understood by the 'immediate' followers of Gotama. These were the ones who composed the suttas 'in which both the reality of the attā and the doctrine of anattā are clearly taught.'¹ The 'scholastic' commentators came much later; as Pérez-Remón is able to demonstrate, the first generation of commentators were the ones who wrote the Niddesa—one of the books included in the Sutta Piṭaka—which even 'waxes eloquent' about the attā, far from teaching its non-existence, and 'is a model of the balanced attitude between the doctrine of attā and the doctrine of anattā, a balance that begins to be broken in the Paṭisambhidāmagga in favour of the latter, a fact that shows unmistakably that an evolution of thought was possible in this matter.'² Pérez-Remón sums up his argument as follows:

The anattā doctrine taught in the Nikāyas has a relative value, not an absolute one. It does not say simply that the self has no reality at all, but that certain things, with which the unlearned man identifies himself, are not the self and that is why one should grow disgusted with them, become detached from them and be liberated. Since this kind of anattā does not negative the self as such but denies self-hood to the things that constitute the non-self, showing thereby that they are empty of any ultimate value and to be repudiated, instead of nullifying the attā doctrine complements it. . . . what is radically rejected in the Nikāyas is the self of the sakkāyadiṭṭhi, that is to say, the self that is wrongly identified with the khandhas. This wrong notion of the self is supposed to prevail in all non-Buddhist systems. . . . Therefore all the passages where any sort of controversy with non-Buddhists is the point at issue, or passages where the bhikkhus themselves are warned of the dangers of any doctrine of self (attavāda), become clear if they are taken to refer to the wrong self of the sakkāyadiṭṭhi. The true self is never brought into question. . . . Original Buddhism belonged by right of birth to the non-Brahmanic world, where the plurality of selves was accepted as a matter of fact. If then the ultimate reality in each man is said to be transcendent what else can that reality in every man be but man's true self? This transcendent self was the one asserted whenever one was made to say of the empirical factors, 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self', a formula that equivalently says, 'I am beyond all this, my self transcends all this'.³

A small but vital item of evidence in support of this view is the fact that 'the empirical factors are always said to be not "that which has no self" (adjective), but simply "the non-self" (noun), placing the empirical factors in clear opposition to the self, which transcends them,

¹Pérez-Remón Self and Non-Self in Early Buddhism p.303

²Ibid p.304 ³Ibid. pp.304-5

and accepting both the extremes of the opposition as real in their own right.¹ But the main support for Pérez-Remón's thesis comes from the hundreds of examples he locates in the suttas in which the word attā is used uninhibitedly and effectively to evoke the true self, and the hundreds of further examples that cover the entire range of denials of self in the literature. Not one of these unambiguously requires the interpretation that has been placed on them by tradition. What have been taken to be denials that the self exists read much more naturally as denials that the perishable personality is the true self. In the final chapter of this study Pérez-Remón's findings are examined afresh against the texts, and especially one feature of the texts to which he did not direct so much attention, that is, the parables and imagery that are used for the self. His thesis emerges as thoroughly convincing to an extent that certainly was not expected when the study was begun.

With hindsight, however, it is possible to see that the opposition to the received Theravādin account of anattā, along with opposition to the negative interpretation of the goal of Buddhism of Western scholarship, was steadily growing. It has been mentioned already that Edward Conze decided, late in his life, that Grimm had been right all along. Although he was primarily a Mahāyānist scholar, Conze had an extremely subtle grasp of the tradition as a whole. In what is perhaps his best book, Buddhist Thought in India (1962) he shows that he had come very close to stating the thesis himself:

On reconsidering the argumentation behind the formula 'this is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self' we find that anything which falls short of the standard of complete self-control should be seen as 'not-self' and should therefore not be appropriated. . . . Our, dreads, worries, solitudes, outbursts of anger, etc., indicate as many abortive hankerings after complete ownership. In getting rid of all that restricts our absolute freedom, in rejecting it as 'not our self', we take an extremely exalted view of ourselves, and we may tremble at our audacity. But unless we dare to be ourselves, dare to be quite free, the external accretions

¹Pérez-Remón Self and Non-Self in Early Buddhism p.305

will stick to us for ever, and we will remain submerged, and alienated from ourselves.

There is, I think, reason to believe that in any case we all the time unknowingly take this most exalted view of ourselves, and that,¹ what is more, it is a healthy thing for us knowingly to do so.

The Buddhist view, according to Conze, was that we should reject totally 'all that is not the Absolute as essentially alien to us.'²

It has already been mentioned too that Mrs Rhys Davids affirmed the view of the reality of the self in early Buddhism. In her 1931 book Śākya, or Buddhist Origins she wrote that a man who lives according to the dhamma 'is living according to the hidden Divinity, Who, by virtue of his manhood, he was.'³ And in her Introduction to The Book of the Gradual Sayings Vol.I, she writes, (speaking of how Gotama used the word dhamma) 'Deliberately, we are told, and told with utmost emphasis, he chose it to mean that immanent Godhead of his day: the Thou art That of the Upaniṣads, Whom alone he held meet he should worship.'⁴ I. B. Horner, who was a student of Mrs Rhys Davids', has expressed a similar point of view in many places, for example in her The Early Buddhist Theory of Man Perfected (1936) she writes that Gotama believed 'that there is an order which transcends the personal, and one which each of his disciples should aspire towards, lit by the light of the Self, the Dhamma within him.'⁵ In her Introduction to Vol. II of the Gradual Sayings she writes of a Majjhima passage: 'Attā is not denied here, or anywhere else in the Pali Canon; it is accepted.' The same has been said by R. C. Zaehner (see page 81 of the present study) and by the doyen of Japanese Buddhist scholars Hajime Nakamura, who writes: 'The Buddha clearly told us what the self

¹ Edward Conze Buddhist Thought in India (University of Michigan Press, 1967, originally published by George Allen & Unwin Ltd in 1962) p.45

² Ibid. p.46

³ C. A. F. Rhys Davids Sākya, or Buddhist Origins (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1931) p.68

⁴ The Book of the Gradual Sayings I (London: Pali Text Society, 1932) p.viii

⁵ I. B. Horner The Early Buddhist Theory of Man Perfected (London: Williams and Northgate, 1936) p.146

is not, but he does not give any clear account of what it is. It is quite wrong to think that there is no self at all according to Buddhism. . . . The Buddha did not deny the soul but was merely silent concerning it. Moreover, he seems to have acknowledged that the true self in our existence will appear in our moral conduct conforming to universal norms.'¹

All of this needs to be placed in perspective by reminding ourselves that the early Buddhists had many different words for the goal, and that the word 'attā' is not used often except in the apophatic mode that is so characteristic of the via negativa kind of mysticism—that is to say, the mode of speech or figurative use of speech in which the positive meaning is deliberately skirted by means of negation. Other words came to take on the role of 'attā' when a positive affirmation was appropriate, for example the word 'dhamma' and, of course, 'nibbāna'.² In the next chapter we shall see how, by a process akin to semantic change, the apophatic use of 'attā' fell away in the tradition, being ill-adapted to the phase of dogmatic consolidation that followed the composition of the suttas, and other words, particularly 'asankhata' meaning the 'Unconditioned', came to bear the transcendent significance that 'attā' almost certainly conveyed in the early tradition.

¹Hajime Nakamura 'Unity and Diversity in Buddhism' in Kenneth W. Morgan (ed) The Path of the Buddha (New York, Ronald Press Co. 1956) p.377

²See John Ross Carter's important study of the word 'dhamma' in the tradition, listed in the Bibliography.

CHAPTER II

THERAVĀDIN VIEWS ANCIENT AND MODERN

I THE ABHIDHAMMA PIṬAKA

As it has already been said, the Sutta Piṭaka can not properly be classed as a Theravādin product because it is made up of material which all the evidence suggests was circulated amongst all of the early Buddhist communities. The first truly Theravādin product is the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, or the third 'basket' of scriptures in the Pāli Canon. Whereas the Sutta Piṭaka reflects the existence of much controversy between Buddhists and other sects, the Abhidhamma Piṭaka reflects disputes which were internal to Buddhism and the felt need to set down the true doctrine in order to settle these disputes.

The first clear division on matters of doctrine (as distinct from the earliest schisms in the Order in the lifetime of Gotama which were over the issue of rigour versus laxity in the discipline and various subsequent disagreements over matters of style or leadership) took place some 150 years after the death of Gotama. This was the dispute between the Theravāda and Mahāsamgika schools in which the latter vigorously advocated the supramundane nature of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, and at the same time disparaged the Arahants and questioned their fallibility.¹ The retrenchment of the Theravādins took the form of an intense concentration on the analysis of conditioned and unconditioned dhammas, which is the main theme of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka—as its title to some extent conveys.

The fifth book of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka called the Kathāvatthu or 'Points of Controversy' begins with the most important dispute that next

¹S. N. Dube Cross Currents in Early Buddhism (New Delhi, Manohar Publications 1980) pp.64, 110

flared up which was about the existence of the soul or 'person'. This was not given the name of 'attā' but of 'pudgala.' The Pudgalavādins or 'Personalists' are portrayed in the Kathāvatthu as twisting and turning in order to remain orthodox in their denial that the pudgala can be identified with any of the khandhas, although they speak of it as deriving from them.¹ Their main concern seems to have been not to proclaim a mystical Absolute such as the attā but merely to explain transmigration coherently, because it seemed to them inconceivable without the continuity of the 'person'. They quoted Gotama as saying: 'This sage Sunetra, who existed in the past, that Sunetra was I', and 'He rejects one body and takes up another', etc. To them this implied an entity denoted by the words 'I' and 'he'. Their favourite scripture was the Bhārahāra Sutta which they argued firmly distinguished the carrier of the burden from the five khandhas symbolised by the burden.

It is not immediately apparent why the Theravādins regarded the Pudgalavādins as a threat. The problem lay in the fact that by this time the Theravādins had refined to a high degree their analysis of all dharmas into the two categories of conditioned (sankhata) and unconditioned (asankhata). Anything that suggested that the khandhas might fall between the two categories of this dualism was a threat to the whole system. The Theravādins are shown in the Kathāvatthu refuting their opponents by quoting the Dīgha Nikāya III, 274: 'There are, bhikkhus, these two irreducible categories, the conditioned . . . the unconditioned, these are the two', and trapping the Pudgalavādins into saying that the person is neither.² We can see, therefore, how the Theravādins were gradually driven by their own rational dialectic into adopting an absolute view of the teaching of anattā. Because everything had to be categorized as either conditioned or unconditioned (nibbāna being the sole 'unconditioned' dhamma), the self or attā—and anything that anyone proposed that resembled the attā, such as the pudgala—had to be declared non-existent.

¹Points of Controversy: The Kathāvatthu (Pali Text Society, 1915) p.33ff

²Ibid. pp.54-5

The Theravādins preserved the mystical nature of their teaching by turning the relationship between anattā and nibbāna into a paradox. Taken alone the doctrine of anattā yields a nihilistic meaning; it is only when it is viewed in relation to nibbāna as the Theravādins understood it that the two together generate a significance very close in spirit to the mysticism that can be discerned in the actual utterances of the Buddha (in so far as we can isolate them in the suttas). The cornerstone of the Theravādin view of nibbāna is its unique status as the asankhata dhatu or 'unconditioned element'. In the Dhammasaṅgani it is characterised in a way that rules out the view that it could amount to utter extinction or nothingness:

The asankhata dhatu (unconditioned element) is indeterminate, neither result nor productive of result, neither grasped at nor favourable to grasping, neither vitiated nor vicious, without applied or sustained thought, to be put away neither by insight nor culture, that which makes for neither the piling up nor the undoing of rebirth, neither appertaining nor not appertaining to training, infinite, excellent, that which does not entail fixed consequences, invisible and non-reacting, not a root-condition, without root conditions as concomitants, not associated with a root-condition, without material form, supramundane, not an āsava, not having āsavas, disconnected with the āsavas, not a fetter, unfavourable to the fetters, disconnected with the fetters, not a hindrance, unfavourable to the hindrances, disconnected with the hindrances, not a perverted belief, unfavourable to a perverted belief, disconnected with a perverted belief, without concomitant object of thought, not mind, not mental property, disconnected with thought, detached from thought, not something coming into being because of thought, not something coming into being along with thought, not something to undergo change after thought, not derived, without the attribute of grasping, disconnected with grasping, disconnected and not favourable to grasping, without the attribute of vice, not vicious, disconnected with the vices, etc.¹

It is easy to understand the kind of monkish work that has gone into a list such as this; what is also important to recognize is the underlying purpose of the enterprise, that is, to set nibbāna apart

¹Quoted by Vishwanath Prasad Varma in Early Buddhism and its Origins, (New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1973) p.258.

as a reality which is not reducible to anything whatever in this changing world, even, it should be noted, thought itself. In this way the Theravādins preserved intact the via negativa preached by the Buddha despite what I am arguing is their misunderstanding of the doctrine of anattā. The concept of nibbāna is now carrying alone a meaning it shared with the 'attā' at first. But they gained in that their understanding of anattā as an absolute denial of self serves to heighten the dualism (between the conditioned and the unconditioned) that is the keynote of their exposition of the Buddha's teaching in the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. This means that they have not strayed essentially from the original teaching; they have merely removed some of its nuances, its subtlety and its reserve. To say this is not to assume arrogantly a superiority of judgment to theirs, it is only to recognize the difference between the workings of a great and original mind (which we can discern in the material preserved so faithfully in the Sutta Piṭaka) and the systematizations of those who were followers. Many of these disciples may have been mystics as accomplished as their master, but creative genius is something else.

II BUDDHAGHOSA

Buddhaghosa's main work the Visuddhimagga or 'Path of Purification' has been the chief guide to Theravādin discipline since the Fifth century and no account of the meaning of nibbāna in Theravāda Buddhism would be complete without mentioning his strong defence of its reality. We may take it that what Buddhaghosa writes is the purest Ceylonese orthodoxy since he states his aim as being to expound the teachings of the 'dwellers in the Great Monastery' at Anurādhapura rather than to advance opinions of his own—he has, in fact, been criticised for a lack of

originality.¹ In the Visuddhimagga the goal throughout is stated to be 'the unformed dhamma', reflecting the division of all dhammas into the two categories that we have already seen in the Abhidhamma Pitaka. In discussing the meditation called 'Recollection of Peace' (another name for the goal), Buddhaghosa uses a number of other terms which are derived from the suttas:

This is how peace, in other words, nibbāna, should be recollected according to its special qualities beginning with disillusionment of vanity. But it should also be recollected according to the other special qualities of peace stated by the Blessed One in the suttas beginning with 'Bhikkhus, I shall teach you the unformed . . . the truth . . . the other shore . . . the hard to see . . . the undecaying . . . the lasting . . . the undiversified . . . the deathless . . . the auspicious . . . the safe . . . the marvellous . . . the intact . . . the unafflicted . . . the purity . . . the island . . . the shelter.' (S IV 360-72)²

In the same section we are told that a Bhikkhu who devotes himself to this recollection of peace 'sleeps in bliss and wakes in bliss.'

The first part of the Visuddhimagga, from which these quotations come, is about practice. It is only in the second, theoretical part that we find actual arguments for the reality of nibbāna. In the most famous passage Buddhaghosa responds to the challenge: 'Is nibbāna non-existent because it is unapprehendable, like the hare's horn?' with the reply: 'That is not so . . . it should not be said that what the foolish ordinary man does not apprehend is unapprehendable.' If nibbāna did not exist the path would be futile, he insists. The texts show, he says, that Arahantship is not mere destruction followed by no further arising, yet what it is cannot be stated 'because of its extreme subtlety . . . and because a Noble One's eye is needed to see it.'³ Nibbāna is permanent and 'immaterial because it transcends the individual essence of matter.'⁴ He carefully explains that the 'non-existence'

¹The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga) tr. Ñānamoli Bhikkhu, Vol.I (London: Shambhala Publications, 1976 1956) Introduction pp.xiv,xix

²Ibid. pp.319-20 ³Ibid. Vol.II pp.578-581 ⁴Ibid. p.581

that we associate with the word 'nibbāna' applies to the 'aggregates of existence'. These are the 'result of past clinging' of the Arahant, i.e. his khandhas. 'The Buddha's goal is one and has no plurality', he writes, to indicate that it is an error to think of the nibbāna before death as being any different fundamentally from the state of the Arahant after death: the difference is only that in the nibbāna before death there are still 'the results of past clinging left', whereas, 'after the last consciousness of the Arahant who has abandoned arousing future aggregates and so prevented kamma from giving result in a future existence, there is no further arising of aggregates of existence, and those already arisen have disappeared.' He continues:

Because it can be arrived at by distinction of knowledge that succeeds through untiring perseverance; and because it is the world of the Omniscient One, nibbāna is not non-existent as regards individual essence in the ultimate sense; for this is said: 'Bhikkhus, there is an unborn, an unbecome, an unmade, an unformed.'¹

Much of the language here is the result of a long evolution of technical terminology in the tradition, so we cannot assume that when Buddhaghosa says that nibbāna 'is not non-existent as regards individual essence in the ultimate sense', he means that the individuality of the Arahant continues to exist. It is more probable that he merely means that nibbāna possesses its own unique essence. We might well ask how an individual can enter nibbāna minus any individual essence of his or her own. But Theravāda Buddhism had by this time carried the rationalization of anattā to such an extreme that it was no longer able to avail itself of the strong affirmation of an individual essence or 'true self' that was implied in Gotama's repeated denial that the perishable khandhas are that self. The Theravādins had cut themselves off from the main stream of Indian mystical thought for which that which survives in liberation most emphatically is the innermost self.

¹The Path of Purification Vol.II, p.581. The quotation is from Udāna 80.

III SOME CONTEMPORARY THERAVĀDIN SCHOLARS

Walpola Rahula, perhaps the best known of all the contemporary Theravādin scholars who have written in English, is a complex man who introduces into his exposition of Buddhism elements that do not belong strictly to the Theravādin tradition alone. He studied under Dasgupta in Calcutta, made friends with Radhakrishnan and Barua, and we are told in a biographical article about him that he 'regarded these scholars, and Demiéville later, as his gurus'.¹ In his exposition of Theravāda Buddhism he uses terms which were developed in the context of European thought, such as 'Absolute' and 'Ultimate Reality'--terms which spring from philosophical Idealism and, perhaps, from Tillichian theology--to correspond to terms in the Pāli texts. There are indeed terms in the Pāli which it is reasonable to translate in this way, but we need to beware of letting them carry all of their European overtones, for example in the following passage the words do not mean quite what they do in the European context. In reply to the question 'What is Nirvāna?' Rahula writes:

The only reasonable reply to give to the question is that it can never be completely or satisfactorily answered in words, because human language is too poor to express the real nature of the Absolute Truth or Ultimate Reality which is Nirvāna. Language is created and used by masses of human beings to express things and ideas experienced by their sense organs and their mind. A supramundane experience like that of the Absolute Truth is not of such a category. Therefore there cannot be words to express that experience, just as the fish has no words in his vocabulary to express the nature of the solid land.²

As we shall see, Rahula means by 'Absolute Truth' not the Hegelian Absolute but just a truth beyond which there is nothing to know, i.e just the truth that all is relative! There is a sense in reading Rahula that he gives with one hand and takes with the other, and that for all his protestations his view of Theravāda Buddhism is no different from simple extinctionism.

¹Somaratra Balasooriya (ed) Buddhist Studies in honour of Walpola Rahula (London: Gordon Fraser, 1980) in the memoir by E. F. C. Ludowyk, p.135.

²Walpola Rahula What the Buddha Taught (New York: Grove Press 1959) p.35

The passage in which Rahula explains what he means by 'Absolute Truth' does not make it any easier to grasp:

Now what is the Absolute Truth? According to Buddhism the Absolute Truth is that there is nothing absolute in the world, that everything is relative, conditioned and impermanent, and that there is no unchanging, everlasting absolute substance like Self, or Soul, or Ātman, within or without. This is the Absolute Truth. The realization of this Truth, i.e. to see things as they are (yathābhūtam), without illusion or ignorance (avijjā), is the extinction of craving 'thirst' (tanhakkhaya), and the cessation (nirodha) of dukkha, which is Nirvāna.¹

Rahula is here placing some strain on the word 'Absolute' when he says that all that exists is relative--normally we take that kind of assertion to mean that there are no Absolutes. It seems that he wants to have his modern empiricist outlook and yet retain a mystical dimension of knowledge. His denial that nibbāna is negative indicates that this is his viewpoint:

Because Nirvāna is thus expressed in negative terms there are many who have got the wrong notion that it is negative, and expresses self-annihilation. Nirvāna is definitely no annihilation of self because there is no self to annihilate. If at all, it is the annihilation of illusion, of the false idea of self.

It is incorrect to say that Nirvāna is negative or positive. The ideas of 'negative' and 'positive' are relative, and are within the realm of duality. These terms cannot be applied to Nirvāna, Absolute Truth, which is beyond duality and relativity.²

As a Theravādin, Rahula denies the reality of 'self' and gets around the charge of annihilationism in the sophisticated way that the tradition adopted, but the second paragraph quoted here introduces a subtle addition to anything that we find in the Theravādin tradition. Here Rahula is doing a little covert back-reading into the Theravādin tradition (which was strictly dualist) of the Mahāyānist notion of going beyond duality (which is monism). As he goes on to say a few pages later:

It is interesting and useful here to remember the Mahāyāna view of Nirvāna as not being different from Samsāra. The same thing is Nirvāna or Samsāra according to the way you look at it--subjectively or objectively. This Mahāyāna view was probably developed out of ideas found in the original Theravāda Pāli texts to which we have referred in our brief discussion.³

¹Walpola Rahula What the Buddha Taught, pp.39-40

²Ibid. pp.37-8

³Ibid. p.40

What Rahula writes about the practical results of attaining Nirvāṇa in this life shows what is meant by seeing Samsāra as Nirvāṇa:

He who has realized the truth, Nirvāṇa, is the happiest being in the world. He is free from all 'complexes' and obsessions, the worries and troubles that torment others. His mental health is perfect. He does not repent the past, nor does he brood over the future. He lives fully in the present. Therefore he appreciates and enjoys things in the fullest sense without self-projections. He is free from anxiety, serene and peaceful. As he is free from selfish desire, hatred, ignorance, conceit, pride and all such 'defilements', he is pure and gentle, full of universal love, compassion, kindness, sympathy understanding and tolerance. His service to others is the purest because he has no thought of self. He gains nothing, accumulates nothing, not even anything spiritual, because he is free from the illusion of Self, and the 'thirst' for becoming.¹

Rahula's tracing of all of these positive ethical achievements to the loss of the 'illusion of Self' is only half plausible. All of these positive things are said in the suttas but are nowhere put down to the giving up of the illusion of Self--the relevant illusion is surely believing that the grasping self is the true Self. Abandoning this illusion gives rise to the state of the jīvan-mukta in the Indian mystical tradition--from which this enumeration of the qualities of an 'Arahant' does not differ in any detail.

The Ven. Dr. H. Saddhatissa is also firm in his belief that the Pāli texts deny a self, but he adopts a more traditionally Theravādin description of nibbāna in his books Buddhist Ethics (1970) and The Buddha's Way (1971):

. . . though with the final disappearance of the potential to live there will be no more of the present state, that is by no means to say that there has not transpired a situation of an entirely different kind from that previously known. We have the parallel in the case of the 'splitting of the atom' when, though no new material substance was found within the atom, there did transpire what is now referred to as a micro-world. Here the problems of the macro-world for the most part ceased to exist. . . . In the research into one type of situation or the solving of one set of problems one may arrive at some novel state which is quite unpredictable from the viewpoint of the previous state. . . . What exists at attainment to Nibbāna may be perfected and true vision but there is no content that we recognize from the present state.²

Saddhatissa, who has carried out much detailed linguistic work (he is the author of the Pāli Tipitika Concordance) proposes that the word 'nirodho', used in the stock formula of the goal of the Path in which nibbāna is the

¹ Walpola Rahula What the Buddha Taught p.43

² H. Saddhatissa Buddhist Ethics (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1970) pp.176-7

ultimate term, should be translated not as 'cessation' or 'extinction', as is the usual practice, but as 'no prevention' or 'no obstruction', because the word stands for the removal of the craving that is the main obstacle to realizing nibbāna.

The goal, as Saddhatissa describes it, is a profoundly ethical state beyond the highest kinds of meditative absorption, a state of freedom of mind and of insight which is beyond the reach of the gods in their deva-realms. (Saddhatissa suggests that the Buddha spoke of devas because they were part of the basic alphabet of the religious understanding of his contemporaries). In the words of the Sutta Nipāta, nibbāna is the excellence of one 'who has become attributeless'. Having put down the 'burden of self' and been 'unyoked from the world', he is one who is detached, not relying on outward things, 'who has attained to the deep conception of Immortality.'¹ From the wealth of documentation that Saddhatissa gives it is impossible to draw the conclusion that nibbāna was believed by those who composed the suttas to be merely a state of preparation for extinction, although the end of rebirth it certainly was.

In his much briefer study entitled The Buddha's Way (1971) he speaks of the two aspects of nibbāna as on the one hand the 'non-arising of all conditioned states', and on the other the attainment of the Unconditioned which the former makes possible. This effectively reaffirms the dualism which we have argued was an important feature of the early teaching and which the Theravādins preserved. This dualism is everywhere apparent:

Nibbāna defies description in the same way as does the 'kingdom of heaven' of the Gospel According to St Thomas. It has been called the deathless, the other shore. Being uncompounded, it is not subject to the three characteristics of all compounded things: impermanence, dukkha and substancelessness. It is compared to the wind. 'Nibbāna is uncompounded; it is made of nothing at all. One cannot say of Nibbāna that it arises or that it does not arise, or that it is produced, or that it is past or present or future; or that it is cognizable by the eye, ear, nose, tongue or body.' It is, however, cognizable by the mind.²

¹H. Saddhatissa Buddhist Ethics pp.190-3 (Sutta-nipāta vv.620-47)

²H. Saddhatissa The Buddha's Way (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971) p.43

Nyānaponika Mahāthera, the author of a well-known book on Theravādin meditation techniques entitled The Heart of Buddhist Meditation (1962), is in fact a German monk who brings to the problem of the meaning of nibbāna his European background. In an important article entitled "Anattā and Nibbāna" (1971) he tries to demonstrate that the Theravāda position is the true middle path between metaphysical assertion and nihilism. He states that it is the belief in a self that leads people to the two extreme positions which Buddhism avoids: 'eternalism' is the belief that some aspect of our personality will continue to exist forever, while 'annihilationism' is scarcely different from this except that it is the fear that what ought to be permanent—so unique and important do we feel ourselves to be—may not in fact be so. 'Thus the belief in a self is responsible not only for eternalism, but also for the annihilationist view.'¹ Neither of these rigid extremes can 'do justice to the dynamic nature of actuality, and still less to Nibbāna which has been declared to be supramundane (lokuttara) and beyond conceptual thinking (atakkāvacara).'² Because this reality is ungraspable Buddhism itself has fluctuated between just the extremes that the founder warned against:

This happened even in early times: the sect of the Sautrāntikas had a rather negativistic view of Nibbāna, while the Mahāyānist conceptions favoured a positive-metaphysical interpretation.

It is therefore not surprising that both of these extremes are advocated by modern Buddhist authors. In Buddhist countries of the East, however, there is now, as far as known to the writer, not a single Buddhist school or sect that favours a nihilistic interpretation of Nibbāna. Contrary to erroneous opinions voiced mainly by uninformed or prejudiced Western authors, Theravāda, i.e. the tradition prevalent in Burma, Ceylon, Thailand, etc., is definitely averse to a view that regards Nibbāna as mere extinction.³

¹The Ven. Nyānaponika Mahāthera, "Anattā and Nibbāna" in Pathways of Buddhist Thought: Essays from 'The Wheel' Edited by The Ven. Nyānaponika Mahāthera and Selected by M. O'C. Walshe (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1971) p.150.

²Ibid. p.151

³Ibid. p.152.

Nyānaponika quotes in full the passage we have already discussed from Buddhaghosa, and also the commentary on the Visuddhimagga known as the Paramattha-manjusā, in order to show that the Theravāda tradition "emphatically rejected a nihilistic conception of its highest ideal, Nibbāna."¹ This he considers enough to refute the negative interpretation.

On the positive metaphysical extreme he has much more to say, since he views it as "the far greater danger to the preservation of the Dhamma's character as a 'Middle Way'," that is, the tendency to connect the goal with any number of theistic, pantheistic or speculative ideas.² That these were thought to be the greatest threat to the Dhamma can be seen from the fact that the first of all of the discourses collected in the Sutta Pitaka, the Brahmajāla Sutta, is wholly devoted to refuting just these positive assertions of some kind of abiding self. In many other discourses too the main potential for misunderstanding is perceived as coming not from the negative view of nibbāna but from various superficial positive theories about it. This second part of Nyānaponika's essay contains his least convincing arguments and has the general tone of sectarian apologetics, especially in his attack on those who see parallels in Vedānta.

The final part of the essay is entitled "Transcending the Extremes" and here Nyānaponika places Theravāda Buddhism firmly, albeit unwittingly, in the main stream of via negativa mysticism. His main point is that the predominantly negative descriptions of nibbāna have the purpose "of eliminating what is inapplicable to Nibbāna and incommensurate with it."³ The method enables us, he says, to make more definite statements about it than by the use of abstract terms which can only be metaphorical. Some

¹Nyānaponika, "Anattā and Nibbāna" p.160.

²Ibid. p.161.

³Ibid. p.170.

positive expressions are to be found like 'the profound, the pure , the permanent, the true, the marvellous' etc., and the emphatic 'There is' that opens the two well-known texts on Nibbana in the Udāna. These are included, Nyānaponika suggests, to exclude the nihilistic extreme--they "leave no doubt that Nibbāna is not conceived as bare extinction or as a camouflage for an absolute Zero"¹--but they also serve to "allay the fears of those who are still without an adequate grasp of the truths of suffering and Anattā and consequently shrink back from the final cessation of suffering, i.e. of rebirth, as if recoiling from a threatening fall into a bottomless abyss."² In other words, the positive utterances about the goal are there simply to prevent misunderstanding, while the predominant method of defining it is negation, as it has to be for the following reason:

Negative utterances are meant to emphasize the supramundane and undepictable nature of Nibbāna that eludes any adequate description in positive terms. Our language is basically unsuited for it, since it is necessarily related to our world, its qualities, and its structure and terms . . . Negative statements are also the most appropriate and reverential way to speak of that which has been called the Marvellous (acchariya) and the Extraordinary (abbhuta).³

Nyānaponika makes a further extremely valuable observation about the use of negation where the aim is practical and what is negated is itself negative. As we know even from simple arithmetic, the negation of negation is positive in its final significance:

Negative ways of expression have also another important advantage. Statements like those defining Nibbāna as 'the destruction of greed, hatred and delusion', at the same time indicate the direction to be taken and the work to be done for actually reaching Nibbāna. And it is this which matters most. These words on the overcoming of greed, hatred and delusion set a clear and convincing task which can be taken up here and now. Further, they do not only point to a way that is practicable, and is worthwhile for its own sake, but they also speak of the lofty goal itself which likewise can be experienced here and now, and not only in an unknown Beyond. For it has been said: 'If greed, hatred and delusion have been completely destroyed, insofar is Nibbāna visible here and now, not delayed, inviting of inspection, and directly experiencable by the wise'(A III 55).⁴

¹Nyānaponika "Anattā and Nibbāna" p.169

²ibid

³ibid pp 169-70

⁴ibid p 170

Here is the explanation, surely, for the fact that the most common expressions of the goal in the suttas are "the end of suffering" and "the destruction of the āsavas", and all greed, hatred and delusion. The early Buddhists were being true to their most characteristic principle which was a practical emphasis on the Path and an avoidance of futile speculation while pursuing the Path. In so called via negativa mysticism it is always the 'via' itself that is the proper focus for effort. This is why the intellectual elaboration of early Buddhism in the Abhidhamma and commentaries took the form not of rational speculation but of intricate psychological analysis--the Path itself remains at all times the focus. Admittedly, a philosophical element is present in the form of a general framework of dualism within which the psychological analysis is conducted, but this dualism is not itself subjected to any detailed rational analysis; it is, rather, the basic set of assumptions which reflected the prevailing intellectual climate.

When modern philosophically-inclined Theravādins approach this material it is the theory of how we acquire knowledge that tends to be the focus of their interest, an issue which is really a psychological one. The main work of K. N. Jayatilleke is his large book entitled The Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge (1963) in which he seeks the traces of his own Empiricist outlook in the Pāli Canon. Having studied under Wittgenstein, and writing at a time when Positivism was still flourishing in the universities in the English speaking countries, he tries to show that the early Buddhists had a very similar attitude to that of contemporary Verificationism. Buddhism was not an a priori system of metaphysics, but operated in terms of inductive inferences based on empirical evidence, he argues, "except for the knowledge of Nirvāṇa".¹ This is the only mention of the point in the whole book,

¹K. N. Jayatilleke, The Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1963) p.457.

except for the final paragraph in the book which is worth quoting

in full:

It is necessary to draw a distinction between the solution of the Logical Positivist and that of the Buddhist. [The subject under discussion has been the reason for the Buddha's silence on certain questions]. The Buddhist while saying that it is meaningless to ask whether one exists in (hoti), does not exist in (na hoti), is born in (upajjati), is not born in (na upajjati) Nirvāṇa, still speaks of such a transcendent state as realizable. The meaninglessness of these questions is thus partly due to the inadequacy of the concepts contained in them to refer to this state. This is clearly brought out in a verse in the Suttanipāṭa. The Buddha was asked the question: 'The person who has attained the goal--does he not exist or does he exist eternally without defect; explain this to me well, O Lord, as you understand it?' (Sn 1075). The Buddha explains: 'The person who has attained the goal is without measure; he does not have that with which one can speak of him.' (Sn 1076). The transempirical cannot be empirically described or understood (v. supra 480) but it can be realized and attained. The Tathagata freed from the conception of form, sensation, ideas, dispositions and consciousness is said to be 'deep, immeasurable and unfathomable, like the great ocean (M I 487). 'Whereof one can speak of him--that he does not have (Sn 1076) and hence one has to be silent. In this respect alone it resembles the Positivist's outlook: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent'. [This is from Wittgenstein, Tractatus 7]. This attitude has, however, to be distinguished from Agnosticism. It was not that there was something that the Buddha did not know, but that what he 'knew' in the transcendent sense could not be conveyed in words because of the limitations of language and of empiricism.¹

David Kalupahana, whose contrary view we shall consider in more detail later, objects to this on the grounds that the Buddha "confined himself to what was empirically given" and therefore rejected any transempirical reality.² Jayatilleke's position is that the Buddha confined himself to what is empirically given in all matters except for the knowledge of the Unconditioned, to which the method does not apply. Once again, this preserves the fundamental dualism of outlook in the Pāli Canon—whereas Kalupahana's position would turn the Dhamma into something resembling modern scientific monism, or the view that there exists only a single kind of reality and that there is only one way of knowing it, i.e. through the senses. For Kalupahana the realm in which causality operates is the whole of reality.

¹ Jayatilleke, The Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge pp.475-6

² David Kalupahana, Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1975) p. 100

In his more popular exposition of the principles of Buddhism published posthumous in 1975, Jayatilleke examines closely the reasons why Nirvāna has been interpreted in an annihilationist sense. The root of the problem, he argues, is that the word 'Nirvāna' is a term which "means both 'extinction' as well as 'the highest positive experience of happiness'. Both these connotations are important for understanding the significance of the term as it is employed in the Buddhist texts."¹ However, the meaning of 'extinction' here is not annihilation, says Jayatilleke, and those scholars who get around the Buddha's denial of annihilationism by saying that it is not annihilation for the samsāric individual to become extinct because there is no 'being' (satta) to be annihilated are creating a "merely verbal difference because, for all practical purposes, the 'individual' is completely extinguished and if we are wrong (according to them) in saying so, it is because the 'individual' did not exist in the first place. Such an interpretation leaves a lot of material unexplained in the early Buddhist texts."² In the first place, Jayatilleke continues, the Buddha did not deny the phenomenal reality of the individual. And in denying that he was an Annihilationist the Buddha explained that when a person's mind is fully emancipated even the most powerful and intelligent of the gods cannot trace where the consciousness of such a Transcendent One (tathāgata) is located. This is so even while he is living, for such a one cannot be probed even in this life (M I 140). Nibbāna may be characterized as follows:

When one's mind is emancipated it does not become a dormant nonentity. If so the Buddha and the Arahants should have been apathetic individuals unconcerned about anything after attaining liberation. Instead, when the mind is purged of greed, hatred and ignorance it is transformed and shines with its natural lustre. It can then act spontaneously out of selflessness (Cāga), compassion (mettā) and understanding (paññā).³

¹K. N. Jayatilleke, The Message of the Buddha (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1975) p.119.

²Ibid. p.120.

³Ibid. p.121.

"Freed from reckoning in terms of the constituents of his personality," such a one is said to be "deep, immeasurable and unfathomable like the great ocean (M I 487)."¹ Individual existence is, by contrast, invariably self-centred and conditioned. When the Buddha was asked whether a person continues to exist after death, having attained such emancipation, he would surely have given the clear answer "He does not continue to exist" if his position was that the person ceases to exist altogether. Instead, he says simply: "The person who has attained the goal is beyond measure."² Elsewhere it is said that he does not come within time, being beyond time, or that he does not come within reckoning. "In other words," writes Jayatilleke, "we do not have the concepts or words to describe adequately the state of the emancipated person who has attained the transcendent reality, whether it be when he lives with the body and the other constituents of personality or after death."³

Jayatilleke goes on to support his interpretation further with two controversial readings of some passages in the Nikāyas. The first of these (at D I 223) gives the answer to the question "Where does the psycho-physical consciousness cease to be without remainder?" as follows: "Consciousness, without distinguishing mark, infinite and shining everywhere--here the material elements do not penetrate . . . but here it is that the conditioned consciousness ceases to be." The second passage (at M I 329-30) gives the Buddha's reply to the god Brahma: "Do not think that this is an empty or void state. There is this consciousness, without distinguishing mark, infinite and shining everywhere; it is untouched by the material elements and not subject to any power."⁴ Unlike the more chauvinist-minded Theravādins (such as Rahula and Nyānaponika) Jayatilleke does not reject comparisons with the Vedānta, in fact he gives many convincing textual examples of direct parallels

¹⁻⁴ K. N. Jayatilleke The Message of the Buddha pp.121-4

between the terms that are used to describe Brahman in Vedānta and the terms used of emancipation in the Pāli Canon. The most impressive of these is the frequently used term for those who have attained Nirvāṇa: 'Brahmabhutena attanā viharati', meaning 'abides with self become Brahman'.¹ Scholars who insist that the Buddhist concept of anattā was conceived in opposition to the Vedāntic concept of ātman have some explaining to do here. Jayatilleke's concluding sentences on the subject leave no doubt that he takes the transcendental view:

Nirvāṇa is, therefore, the Transcendent Reality, whose real nature we cannot grasp with our normal minds because of our self-imposed limitations. It is a state of freedom (vimutti), power (vasī), perfection (pārisuddhi), knowledge (aññā) and perfect happiness of a transcendent sort. It is also said to be a state of perfect mental health, which we should try to attain for our personal happiness as well as for harmonious living.²

The emphasis here is, however, on the value of the attainment of Nirvāṇa for our present lives, which I think is a subtle shift away from the world-rejecting dualism which predominates in the Canon. Like Rahula, Jayatilleke is a modern Westernized intellectual who has felt the influence of the prevailing scientific and ethical ideologies. He is doing no violence to the canonical material in drawing from it the ideas he mentions, but there is a difference discernible in his valuation of life in the world from what we tend to find in the writings of the ancient Buddhists. It is extremely hard to maintain a dualistic outlook on the world in the contemporary intellectual climate, unless perhaps one is a Hell-fire and damnation kind of Christian.

David Kalupahana, who as has been already mentioned a student of Jayatilleke's and who in fact prepared the Index for his major work The Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge, does not see early Buddhism as a form of dualism at all. For him it is a simple monism,

¹Jayatilleke, The Message of the Buddha p.126.

²Ibid. p.127.

very much akin to and actually foreshadowing the monistic outlook of modern scientific empiricism. Only one kind of reality exists and the chief thing that early Buddhism had to say about this reality was that it is subject to the law of causality (paticca-samuppada)-- hence the title of Kalupahana's book Causality: the Central Philosophy of Buddhism (which echoes Stcherbatsky's title The Central Conception of Buddhism and T. R. V. Murti's The Central Philosophy of Buddhism which were both discussed in the previous chapter). In the conclusion to his book Kalupahana writes:

All this may lead to the following conclusions. Rejecting an Absolute (such as the Brāhman or Ātman of the Upaniṣads) or a transempirical reality, the Buddha confined himself to what is empirically given. Following a method comparable to that adopted by the modern Logical Positivists, he sometimes resorted to linguistic analysis and appeal to demonstrate the futility of metaphysics. As a result of his empiricism he recognized causality as the reality and made it the essence of his teachings. Hence his statement: "He who sees causality sees the dhmma."¹

He has a fuller treatment of the specific issue of the meaning of nibbāna in his book Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis (1976) in which he tackles a few of the items of textual evidence for a transempirical meaning of nibbāna. For example he asks: "What, then, is the nature of immortality (amata) spoken of so often? According to what has been said so far, immortality and deathlessness would mean rebirthlessness (apunabhava) only. With the elimination of craving and the consequent realization that one is freed, a person will not be in any way interested in an afterlife."² In the same vein he writes that the term translated so often as 'transcendent' (lokuttara) refers merely to the state of one whose dispositions have all become pacified so that he no longer shares the attitudes of ordinary human beings: "It is this and only this that makes the life of one who has attained nirvāṇa 'transcendent'."³ Kalupahana suggests, with

¹David J. Kalupahana, Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism p.185.

²David J. Kalupahana, Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1976) pp.73-4.

about as little plausibility: "When a dead Arahant was compared to a great ocean, deep, immeasurable and unfathomable, it meant only that there is no way of knowing what he is like."¹ In other words, Kalupahana is implying that the Buddha used the analogy merely as a way of expressing his empiricist scepticism of all speculation. This is to ignore completely the poetry in the words. Kalupahana's Buddha, like Stcherbatsky's, is a philosopher pure and simple, and pity the poor fools who later tried to make a religion out of his austere teaching.

Since this is his point of view it is easy to understand how disappointed Kalupahana was by his teacher Jayatilleke's apparent about-face in saying that the Buddha was a thorough-going empiricist in all matters until it came to the Unconditioned or transempirical reality of nibbāna. Kalupahana writes:

Jayatilleke, in his Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge, made a great effort to show that early Buddhism was empiricist and did not accept any metaphysical principle or any empirically unverifiable entity. But the interpretations of Buddhism by Western, Hindu, and Far Eastern scholars were so overwhelming that in the end he admitted the existence of a "transempirical which cannot be empirically described and understood but which can be realized and attained [after death]," thereby undermining the whole basis of Buddhist empiricism which he was endeavouring to establish.²

When Kalupahana uses the word 'empiricism' he really means 'positivism' which is a particular application of empiricism to the problems of metaphysics. The Buddha may have been an empiricist in his method without drawing the anti-metaphysical or anti-transcendental conclusions that Kalupahana believes he drew. If Jayatilleke is right, the Buddha always emphasized direct experience as the test of his claims rather than the methods of speculative metaphysics especially when it came to investigating the trans-empirical reality. 'Empiricism' may, then, have a broader meaning of bringing everything to the test of experience,

¹David Kalupahana Buddhist Philosophy p.83

²Ibid, p.87

--in which case it is very appropriate to use it of the Buddha.

The disagreement between Jayatilleke and Kalupahana has sparked off some debate, something that is all too rare in Buddhist scholarship. From Sri Lanka, A. D. P. Kalanasuriya has written an article which compares the two views entitled 'Two Modern Sinhalese Views of Nibbāna' (1979) in which he finds Kalupahana's arguments 'not unimpressive' but suspects him of 'reading the meanings of advanced Western thought into the Dhamma of Buddhism'.¹ Kalanasuriya, himself also a philosopher, points out that there are other kinds of empiricism than that most fashionable in the West at present. He likens Kalupahana's positivism to the 'materialist' position of the Buddha's day and calls it 'naive empiricism'² from which the Buddha dissociated himself as a doctrine 'which referred to nothing beyond perceptions.'³ The utterances of the Buddha suggest, says Kalanasuriya, that he was aware of the limitations of this sort of empiricism, for example when he spoke about 'perfect release', 'untraceability', being 'without measure' (na pamānam), 'deep and unfathomable' (gambhiro duppariyaqāho) and 'all modes of speech removed' etc. These sayings indicate, he writes, that the Dhamma has a 'mystical core'. He then uses Wittgensteinian concepts--of embedded language, family resemblance, category errors etc.--to criticise Kalupahana's viewpoint as too simple. An irony here is that Kalupahana's viewpoint is close to that of the early Wittgenstein, whereas the concepts that are used against him here come from the later Wittgenstein--and Wittgenstein developed his later views partly to accomodate his own mystical apprehensions.

Another response to Kalupahana's work has come from his colleague at the University of Hawaii, Gary Doore, who takes him to task for ignoring the fact that yogins in the Buddha's time all recognized a

¹A. D. P. Kalanasuriya 'Two Modern Sinhalese Views of Nibbāna' in Religion Vol.9, Spring 1979, pp.2-3

²Ibid. p.5 ³Ibid. p.5 ⁴Ibid. p.8

transcendental state about which they 'have generally preferred to remain silent, maintaining that it cannot be adequately described by concepts.'¹ Kalupahana has ignored all of this and at the same time 'imported his own philosophical preferences' on the basis of 'very slender textual evidence.'² The 'stoical, matter-of-fact conception of the supreme goal' that Kalupahana adopts, says Doore, 'certainly does not seem the sort of thing a new religion would thrive on.'³ He is sharply critical of the explanation that Kalupahana gives of the transcendental turn that Buddhism, on his account, later took, i.e. that it was 'emotionalism' and the desire to have a supernatural figure to worship which resulted in his being invested with transcendental characteristics. This was greatly to exaggerate the difference between early and later Buddhism, Doore argues.

Kalupahana appears to be a lone voice amongst modern Theravādins in expressing his negative view of nibbāna. Without exception, so far as I have been able to discover, modern teachers of the Theravādin forms of meditation take the transcendental view. One of the most famous, the Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma, writes: 'Nibbāna is a dhamma entirely liberated from the bodily and mental processes and all mundane notions . . . one is absolutely free from the entire mundane sphere.'⁴ U Thittila, lecturer in philosophy at the University of Rangoon, who was chosen by the Buddha Sasana Council of Burma to write the chapter on 'The Fundamental Principles of Theravāda Buddhism' for The Path of the Buddha edited by Kenneth Morgan (1956) writes: 'To go forth out of the worldly life into the higher spiritual life is the advice of the Buddha. To be absorbed into what is real, permanent--into Nibbāna--is the end of the Buddhist way of life, the path of the Buddha.'⁵

¹⁻³ Gary Doore 'The Radically Empiricist Interpretation of Early Buddhist Nirvāna' in Religious Studies Vol.15, No.1, March 1979, pp.67-8

⁴ U Thittila in The Path of the Buddha (ed) Kenneth W. Morgan (New York: Ronald Press Co., 1956) p.101

⁵ Mahasi Sayadaw Practical Insight Meditation (Kandy: The Forset Hermitage 1971) p.34

CHAPTER III

THE EVIDENCE OF THE PĀLI NIKĀYAS

I INTRODUCTORY

This final chapter, unfortunately at fifty pages much too brief for the task, is an attempt to show that the positive interpretation of the goal of early Buddhism, associated at the end of the first chapter with the names of Coomaraswamy, Grimm, Thomas, Mrs Rhys Davids, Horner, Conze, Murti, Pande, Eliade and Pérez-Remón (although they are by no means in perfect agreement with one another), does not depend only on a few isolated, peripheral texts for its support. Essentially, it is a reinterpretation of texts which those on both sides of the question acknowledge to be the central ones in the tradition. Just as the negative interpretation can be seen to be consistent with these texts the positive interpretation is a construction that can be placed upon all of the texts consistently. The argument is then about which is the more plausible, and this needs to be carried on both at the very detailed level and in terms of the teaching as a whole. In this chapter the focus is particularly on texts which teach the doctrine of anattā with a special emphasis on the illustrations that are used to explain the teaching, since these are seldom closely examined as an aid to interpreting the more specifically doctrinal texts. As it will be seen, the imagery and parables in the suttas most often run quite counter to the later Theravādin orthodoxy and the received view of Western scholarship. The aim of this chapter is to argue, on the basis of a fresh appraisal of the Pāli Nikāyas, in favour of what is not a new or original interpretation but a growing minority opinion amongst scholars—and one which if it gains ground will certainly be disturbing to the Theravāda Buddhist communities who have not yet had their confrontation

with the findings of modern scholarship in the way that the Christian churches have had theirs in the last fifty years. Ironically, the point of view that is advanced here is less threatening to their ideals than the nihilistic interpretation of their texts which has been the standard view of Western scholars for over a hundred years, and which the Theravādin communities have quietly ignored; but it will still be a considerable upset to them to have the orthodox view of the anattā teaching called so severely into question.

In this chapter the battle over the meaning of particular texts is carried on on two fronts, with the Theravādin orthodoxy on one flank and the standard Western viewpoint on the other. This, regrettably, may seem confusing, but it is inevitable that an attack on the Theravādin view of anattā will also undermine the Western scholars' position which is built on it. At times it might seem unclear which is the target of criticism when, in fact, both positions are under attack together. As we shall go on to argue, the Western scholars have merely added a further layer of rationalist misunderstanding to the original one of the Theravādins.

Essentially, the misunderstanding by both the orthodox Theravādins and Western scholars has arisen from a misapprehension of the function of negative or apophatic utterances in the type of mysticism known as the 'via negativa', of which the 'neti! neti!--not this! not this!' of the Upaniṣads is a perfect example. Gotama's use of this mode was so uncompromising that it was almost inevitable that it would be misunderstood during the phase of doctrinal consolidation that always follows a strong religious innovation. His words were taken literally and followed with a dogged loyalty, despite the apparent absurdity and the serious incoherence in the doctrine that was the consequence. This is no exception to the normal pattern in the history of religions. But it is a considerable irony that Western scholarship has followed

into the same error and for the same reason, that is, an inability to lay aside the assumption that everything in a mystical teaching must be able to be understood and defined rationally.

II THE PARABLE OF THE VENOMOUS SNAKE

The evidence is everywhere in the Pāli texts that Gotama himself had to contend with the rationalistic misunderstanding of his utterances and that he was frequently taken to be a nihilist because of his use of the apophatic mode. No better evidence for this exists than the "Parable of the Venomous Snake" (the Alagaddūpama-sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya). In this sutta the Buddha likens the wrong grasp of his teaching to taking hold of a snake by the tail instead of behind its neck so that it turns and bites. Obviously a composite work like most of the longer suttas this one has a certain literary unity and it draws together more material of extreme interest than almost any other in the Canon, including one of the key passages on which the Theravādin conception of anattā as absolute is founded—the perfect case of the snake turning and biting because of a faulty grasp. It will be worth dwelling on this sutta before following the themes that it raises into other parts of the Nikāyan literature.

Judging by the force of Gotama's repudiation of it, the worst example of grasping the snake by the tail was the accusation of nihilism or annihilationism. This repudiation must be placed in its context in the sutta because it clarifies which teaching it was that was so easily misunderstood as annihilationism. Gotama had just been speaking about the conceit 'I am' and how it must be 'got rid of by the monk, cut down to the roots, made like a palm-tree stump, made so that it can come to no future existence, not liable to rise again.' Getting rid of the conceit 'I am' is the culminating achievement that follows upon getting

rid of 'ignorance', 'faring on in births', 'craving' and 'the five fetters binding to the lower shore'. The passage then continues:

Monks, when a monk's mind is freed thus, the devas--those with Indra, those with Brahmā, those with Pajāpati, do not succeed in their search if they think: 'This is the discriminative consciousness attached to a Tathāgata.' What is the reason for this? I, monks, say that in this very life a Tathāgata is untraceable.¹

From this it is clear that getting rid of the conceit 'I am' is identified with the freedom which is nibbāna in this life, the word 'Tathāgata' here meaning any bhikkhu who has attained the goal and so become untraceable even to the gods. But this might easily be taken to mean that the essential being of the bhikkhu has ceased to exist, and evidently Gotama even in his own lifetime was being misunderstood in this way. He immediately goes on to say that this is a calumny:

Although I, monks, am one who speaks thus, who points out thus, there are some recluses and brahmins who misrepresent me untruly, vainly, falsely, not in accordance with fact, saying: 'The recluse Gotama is a nihilist (venayiko), he lays down the cutting off, the destruction, the disappearance of the existing entity (sato satassa).' But as this, monks, is just what I am not, as this is just what I do not say, therefore these worthy recluses and brahmins misrepresent me untruly, vainly, falsely. . . . Formerly I, monks, as well as now, lay down simply anguish and the stopping of anguish.²

The crux here is the meaning of 'sato satassa' which I. B. Horner has translated as 'the existing entity', a reading which permits the standard Theravādin construction to be placed on the passage, i.e. that all that the Buddha is repudiating here is that he ever said there was an entity in the first place to be cut off, destroyed etc. If that is what he meant this would have been the ideal context in which to have said so in unmistakeable terms. If, on the other hand, 'sato satassa' is understood as 'the essential being' or 'true being' (a more probable interpretation of the doubling of the root 'sat-') the passage takes on an entirely different significance and one which makes much more sense of what comes both before and after it. The denial of nihilism

¹Middle Length Sayings I p.180

²Ibid.

then takes on a meaning commensurate with the terms used in its rejection, whereas the Theravādin interpretation trivialises it and makes the vehemence of the passage puzzling. Supporters of the absolute anattā reading of the passage hold up the final sentence to clinch their case: 'I . . . lay down simply anguish and the stopping of anguish.' But surely the point of this is that all that Gotama has said is cut off, destroyed etc., is dukkha, and most emphatically not the essential existence of a bhikkhu. The passage therefore tells us clearly what the getting rid of the conceit 'I am' should not be taken to mean. The conceit 'I am' refers to pride (asmimāna) which always involves the identification of one's true, permanent being with that which is impermanent, transient, perishable, namely the khandhas.

A brief reminder follows of the moral implications of giving up such pride which are that in this context even such an insult as being called a nihilist should provoke no resentment, any more than praise should bring elation. If we respect the literary unity of the sutta we are bound to take the next exhortation as following upon the denial of nihilism and the assertion of the Buddha that all that is annihilated is suffering when nibbāna is won. The wording is highly significant:

Wherefore, monks, what is not yours, put it away. Putting it away will for a long time be for your welfare and happiness. And what, monks, is not yours? Material shape, monks, is not yours; put it away, putting it away will be for a long time for your welfare and happiness [and so on for the remaining khandhas]. What do you think about this, monks? If a person were to gather or burn or do as he pleases with the grass, twigs, branches and foliage in this Jeta Grove, would it occur to you: the person is gathering us, he is burning us, he is doing as he pleases with us?

"No, Lord. What is the reason for this? It is that this, Lord, is not our self nor what belongs to self."

"Even so, monks, what is not yours, put it away; putting it away will be for a long time for your welfare and happiness. . . .¹

If we understand this parable as a further clarification of the Buddha's repudiation of the charge that he is a denier of the essential self it

¹Middle Length Sayings p.181 Vol.I

makes excellent sense, whereas there is no way that it can even be rendered intelligible in the light of the standard Theravādin view. The obvious meaning is that a gardener who clears up the debris of windfalls or whatever that is lying about in Jeta Grove is doing nothing to harm the grove let alone the occupants of the grove. He is actually beautifying the place for the benefit of the occupants. The grass, twigs, branches and foliage are so many bundles of rubbish corresponding to the bodily form, feelings, perception, habitual tendencies and consciousness of the bhikkhus seated in the grove. The Buddha's teaching radically denies our ultimate identity with the very things that we normally hold most dear, but he could hardly have devised a clearer metaphor to express his conviction that the destruction of the khandhas does no harm whatever to what we essentially are. On the other hand the absolute anattā view would have it that we are only the grass, twigs, branches and foliage, and that it is we ourselves who are burned up with them. This renders the parable absurd as well as the accompanying exhortation: "Even so, monks, what is not yours, put it away; putting it away will be for a long time for your welfare and happiness." If we are nothing over and above the khandhas whose welfare and happiness could ensue? And to what do the pronouns 'yours' and 'your' refer? The implication of the parable is even clearer if we take the words 'for a long time' in the sense that they invite as a locution for 'eternity'.

We have dealt so far only with the concluding paragraphs of the sutta. Apart from some loosely and even questionably related material at the beginning of the sutta it exhibits a strong thematic unity, right from the point at which the snake metaphor is introduced. That is followed directly, as if to balance it, by the parable of the raft--having taught about right and wrong grasp it is appropriate to have a parable about right letting go. As we have seen, the rest of the

sutta is about letting go or putting away from us all that is not truly ourselves. It is therefore puzzling to come upon some lines which seem to indicate that in Gotama's view there is no real self anyway:

If, monks, there were Self, could it be said: 'There is that which belongs to Self?

"Yes, Lord."

Or, monks, if there were what belongs to Self, could it be said: 'There is Self for me?'

"Yes, Lord."

But if Self, monks, or what belongs to Self, do not exist in reality and truth, is not the speculative view: 'This is the world this is the self, after dying I will become permanent, lasting, eternal, not liable to change, I will stand fast like unto the eternal'--is not this, monks, absolute complete folly?¹

The meaning of this passage is unclear even if the translation proposed here is accepted, but a key word in the Pāli is ambiguous. This is the word 'anupalabbhamāne' which can mean either 'not-existing' or else 'incomprehensible'. If Self and what belongs to Self are incomprehensible the meaning of the passage is transformed and Gotama is seen instead to be reasoning with his followers that speculative views about something that is beyond the grasp of mind must be seen as perfect foolishness. This reading gains strong support from the context in which Gotama says he can see no theory of Self "from the grasping of which there would not arise grief, suffering, anguish, lamentation, despair." The clear implication is that all theorising about the attā is doomed to the error of identifying it with something perishable and transient in the world. All speculative views threaten the mystical dualism which I am arguing is the true explanation of the doctrine of anattā: it simply means that all that is impermanent is not-Self, while the true Self remains beyond the reach of thought, beyond all change and beyond all suffering. It is to be known only by following the Path.

Immediately following the passage quoted above is the brief dialogue about anattā and impermanence which appears with little variation more

¹Middle Length Sayings I p.177 I.B. Horner in fact translates anupalabbhamāne as 'incomprehensible' and I have altered the translation here to give the reading favoured by Theravādin tradition.

often in the Canon than any other teaching attributed to Gotama:

What do you think about this, monks: is material shape permanent or impermanent?

"Impermanent, Lord."

But is what is impermanent painful or pleasant?

"Painful, Lord."

But is it fitting to regard that which is impermanent, painful, liable to change, as 'This is mine, this I am, this is my self'?

"No, Lord." [And so on for the other khandhas].

Wherefore, monks, whatever is material shape, past, future, present, subjective or objective, gross or subtle, mean or excellent, whether it is far or near--all material shape should be seen thus by perfect intuitive wisdom as it really is: This is not mine, this am I not, this is not my self. [This is repeated for the other khandhas].¹

This exchange, repeated so many times in the suttas (although it is interesting that it makes no appearance in the Dīgha Nikāya) is the basis for the doctrine of anattā as it was developed in the Theravāda literature, from the Abhidhamma onwards. Given what we now know about the varieties of mysticism and about the doctrinal developments within the institutions that have arisen out of the inspiration of great mystics, it should be no surprise to us that the Theravādins took this radical mystical teaching in the wrong way and ossified it into a perverse dogma. Misunderstanding is the norm rather than the exception in the history of mystical traditions, and apophatic mysticism is the type most prone to being misunderstood. The nature of the error needs no explanation after what has already been said about Gotama's denial of nihilism and the Jeta Grove parable. But we should savour the irony of Theravādin scholastic rationalists concluding from the Buddha's insistence that not even our feelings or our consciousness is our true self that we therefore must have no self. Their conclusion reflects their analysis of what exists and not the Buddha's, since it is their inference and not his that the khandhas describe exhaustively all that we are. The sheer power of tradition is illustrated by the fact that not even Buddhaghosa, who could construe meaning through a brick wall, was able to penetrate the error. Scholasticism is not the same as scholarship.

¹Middle Length Sayings I pp.177-8

The misunderstanding has arisen because in every appearance of the stock passage with the refrain: 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self,' there is genuine ambiguity. It can be taken to mean, as the Theravāda tradition has taken it, that there simply is no self, or else that Gotama was saying only what the self is not and refusing to tell us what it is. It is obvious why the Theravādins rejected the latter interpretation: the teaching is too radical and mystically elevated. Later generations of monks simply could not fathom what the Buddha was talking about. They doggedly bent their minds to what they thought he meant despite its being perverse and pointless and not the sort of thing anyone would give assent to outside the trammels of institutional religion. In the contexts in which the teaching appears in the Sutta Piṭaka the interpretation that they placed upon it frequently becomes strained and at times unreasonable, but it is always less baffling than the real sense of the words which thrusts us into the undefined and unknown realm of mystical experience. The Theravādin interpretation is an example of the very grasping of mind that Gotama condemned as mere speculation. It is the imposition of a narrow, literalist rationalism on a mystical teaching, yet it did not abrogate the mystical character of the so-called Southern School because nibbāna remained for it the asankhata dhātu, the unconditioned element, the deathless realm set over and apart from all that is impermanent. So, in fact, much of the spirit of the anattā teaching with its radical denial of permanence to any aspect of our mortal selves remains unimpaired provided it is always held in tension with the Theravādin understanding of nibbāna. This is just what Western scholars have failed to appreciate. They have merely added another layer of rationalist misunderstanding to the Theravādins' original one.

Now that we have the benefit of comparative studies in mysticism and are familiar with a variety of examples of the via negativa and its

peculiar logic, it is possible to read the Sutta Pitaka in a new light. Passages which have always seemed gratuitous or slightly nonsensical suddenly make strong and coherent good sense, and nowhere does the via negativa interpretation encounter real difficulties.

An objection to this interpretation which has no real substance and can be dismissed very quickly is the charge of 'levelling', or of making out that all mysticism is the same teaching under various guises and that, therefore, there are no real differences between Hinduism and Buddhism. There are very deep differences which we have no wish to disguise. The Upaniṣads belong to a different intellectual and sociological world from that of the Sutta Piṭaka, being an expression of mysticism from within the ritualistic, theistic religion of the Brahmins, whereas Buddhism arose in Samana religion which was atheistic and dualistic--in the way that asceticism very commonly is. Whereas Upaniṣadic speculation developed in the direction of monism, denying the material world to be separate from Brahman, Buddhism remained--until the advent of Mahāyāna Buddhism--firmly dualistic in the way in which it separated samsāra from nirvāṇa. Early Buddhism belongs with its relatives the Sāṅkhya, Yoga and Jain versions of shramanism, as Eliade and Pérez-Remón have pointed out. This is evidenced by the way in which the scriptures of all four schools possess the formula we have been examining of 'This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.'¹ In all of them it means the same, i.e. that we should not misidentify ourselves with what is impermanent.

III A STUDY OF 'THE BOOK OF KINDRED SAYINGS ON THE FACTORS OF PERSONALITY'

Of the one hundred and fifty-eight suttas in the main part of the Khandhā-samyutta there is not one which invites any other interpretation than the one we have proposed. Most express a strong dualism between the

¹Joaquín Pérez-Remón Self and Non-self in Early Buddhism (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1980) pp.154-7, 348-9.

impermanent and the permanent (No.18), or that which is of a nature to crumble away and that which is incorruptible (No.32), between bondage to the 'lower world' and the implied freedom of a higher reality (No.55), or between impurity and purity (No. 60). Often the dualism is more subtle and psychological, but the pattern is the same of a contrast between a life that is still in the grip of the delusion that the khandhas contain our true self and the state of knowledge that this is untrue; for example there is the contrast between the state of mind which is 'always guessing' and 'stubbornly perverse' and the state of mind of one who is 'released', 'steadfast', happy', 'untroubled' and, most significantly, 'of its own self utterly well' (No.46). None of the contexts in which it is denied that the khandhas are the self create an obstacle for the interpretation that this means the self is something other than the khandhas; on the contrary, the contexts make the traditional view more difficult to sustain. In a great many cases the mystical interpretation gains strongly in plausibility, for example when we are told that giving up attachment to the khandhas brings an 'aloofness' in which there is no longer any foothold for further consciousness in this world and the consciousness becomes 'freed' and thereby 'steady' (No.53), or that putting away that which 'does not belong to the self' (anattaniya) one reaches the 'supreme goal' which 'in this very life' and 'of himself' the Arahant 'fully understands', 'realizes' and 'abides in' (No.69), or that having 'reduced, abandoned, scattered, quenched' all attachment to the khandhas the heart is set free and is able to 'ponder' on that which even the 'Brahmas and their consorts . . . do not grasp' (No.79). None of this looks like the language that one might expect if the goal was purely and simply extinction of that which is not and never was a true self, the khandhas. The goal certainly is the putting away in this life of the khandhas and ultimately their extinction through the ending of rebirth, but that is not all that it is unless the poetry and imagery surrounding the goal is gratuitous and misleading.

A striking example of such imagery to evoke the goal comes in the parable that Gotama tells the frail and elderly Tissa who is despondent about his grasp of the dhamma (No.84). After instructing him in the usual way about dissociating himself from the impermanent khandhas Gotama tells him a parable about a journey through 'thick forest' which represents 'ignorance', a 'great marshy swamp' representing the 'feeling desires', past a 'steep precipice' corresponding to 'vexation and despair', and promises him that if he keeps on for a little he will 'see a delightful stretch of level ground' which Gotama explains 'is a name for nibbāna . . . Be of good cheer, Tissa.' This is only one of hundreds of images used in the Sutta Piṭaka to evoke the nature of the path or the goal which do not lend themselves to the interpretation that the aim was simply extinction or khandha suicide. I have yet to find an image or parable that does so lend itself. A feature of the parables which it is all too easy to overlook is that the true subject of the story is always depicted as continuing to be present when the goal is attained, like the monks in Jeta Grove when the debris representing the khandhas has all been burnt, or like Tissa in the parable just quoted here.¹ There is no hint that he will suddenly become absent when the delightful stretch of level ground is reached. Similarly, the image of crossing the Ganges to the other shore which appears in the parable of the raft and in abbreviated forms throughout the literature always implies the continuing presence of the person who has crossed over and won his goal. Perhaps it is in the nature of stories that it is very hard to tell one about how good we will feel to be dead, but Gotama's parables never even make a gesture in this direction. The point seems always to be that there is a beyond so we should 'be of good cheer'.

For the purpose of our argument the most important sutta in the Khandha-samyutta is No.85, the dialogue with Yamaka, the bhikkhu in whose mind had arisen the evil heresy: 'Thus do I understand the doctrine

¹The story of the children who give up playing with sand-castles is another case in point. Do they symbolise the self? See K.S. III p.156.

taught by the Exalted One: in so far as a brother has destroyed the āsavas he is broken up and perishes when the body breaks up, he becomes not after death.' F. L. Woodward gives in his footnote the view of the Commentary which shows how the Theravādin tradition coped with the sutta, i.e. by interpreting Yamaka's heresy as believing there was a self in the first place:

If his view were this: "the aggregates rise and cease; there is a ceasing of the round of existence" it would be no heresy but expert knowledge of the teaching. But in so far as he thought: "a being is broken up and perishes" herein arises a heretical view.¹

But the alternative, in the light of which the sutta as a whole and the important illustration with which it ends make far better sense, is that Yamaka's heresy was in denying that anything remains after the death of a bhikkhu who has attained the goal. The Theravādins had become very 'expert' at dodging the obvious meaning of a passage and substituting a sophisticated one.

Sariputta's answer to Yamaka is subtle and profound, that is, if our interpretation is correct. If the Theravādins are right it is not much more than a smart answer. The crux once again is the word 'anupalabbhiyamāno'² which Woodward translates in accordance with the Theravādin Commentary as 'not existing' whereas the meaning of the whole sutta alters if it is translated as 'incomprehensible':

Then, friend Yamaka, since in this very life a Tathāgata is not to be regarded as existing in truth and reality [or: is not to be comprehended by you as he truly and really is] is it proper for you to assert: "As I understand the doctrine of the Exalted One, in so far as a brother has destroyed the āsavas he is broken up and perishes when his body is broken up, he becomes not after death"?³

Either reading can be made to follow from the exchange between Yamaka and Sariputta up to that point although it makes more sense to infer that Sariputta is not just bludgeoning Yamaka into giving stock answers

¹Kindred Sayings III p.93.

²See Pérez-Remón's detailed notes on this hybrid form, pp.272-3.

³Kindred Sayings III p.93.

but is actually teaching him something by placing him in a dilemma with a series of questions that the Buddha himself is represented as asking in the next sutta (No. 86). These questions are subtly designed to bring out the fact that a Tathāgata can not be reduced to his khandhas yet they are his and not someone else's and we can not say he has no body, feelings etc. If this is the drift of the questions then the Theravādin version of the crux of the sutta is nonsensical. The Tathāgata has not been shown to be non-existent but to have been placed beyond simple definition. It is one more lesson on the inadequacy of 'views' (diṭṭhī).

The Theravādin interpretation encounters even graver difficulties with the rest of the sutta. Yamaka, when asked what he would now say about what happens after death to a bhikkhu who has destroyed the āsavas, says he would only assert now that what is impermanent and subject to dukkha has been broken up. The implication is surely that he has now abandoned his annihilationism and no longer believes that the bhikkhu himself is broken up and perishes with the breaking up of his khandhas. This interpretation is strongly supported by the parable of the house-father and the secret murderer which immediately follows as if to drive home what has been learned. It is a story about the false sense of security of a man who harbours his arch enemy in his own house and is lulled into thinking he is his friend. The khandhas are this false friend and should be rejected as not belonging to us, to be put away from us. To say of any of them: "It is my self" is to be like the rich man and harbour an alien. The rich man stands to the alien in his household as the true self does to the khandhas. Otherwise who is the rich man in the story? Once again the theory of absolute anattā makes nonsense of a parable.

Other examples of parables and similes which resist the Theravādin interpretation and support the one we are proposing abound in the texts. Even in the Khandha-samyutta there are many more, such as the simile

of the scent and the lotus or the soiled cloth that is cleansed and aired, both images of the self in relation to the khandhas (No.89), or the parable of the man swept away in a mountain torrent who grasps desperately at reeds, shrubs and grasses as he is swept downstream. These, we are told, 'might break away, and owing to that he might come to his destruction. Even so, brethren, the untaught many-folk . . . regard the body as self etc.' (No.93). Or again there is the image of the lotus, dark blue or white, which:

. . . born in the water, come to full growth in the water, rises to the surface and stands unspotted by the water, even so the Tathāgata having come to full growth in the world, passing beyond the world, abides unspotted by the world (No.94).

This use of India's favourite image for the spiritual life contains no suggestion that the Tathāgata is non-existent or simply extinct. The context makes it very clear that he has transcended the khandhas in order to come to this full flowering. The image has a special depth in its implication that even if the goal is transcendence, human life is where the Tathāgata's roots are. We have already encountered the idea that he is not separable from his khandhas even if he is not to be identified with them. The metaphor admits a more balanced view than the harsh dialectic of 'this is not mine etc.' which finds its more typical analogues in the next sutta in which the khandhas are likened to a blob of foam on the Ganges, a momentary rain-bubble in a pool, a noonday mirage, a plantain trunk (an image which aptly suggests the absence in the khandhas of that essence, here likened to the heart-wood, for which we seek), and, finally, the trickery of a juggler which is pure glamour without essence. Nowhere does the sutta (No.95) suggest that there is no essence, only that we seek it in the wrong place if we expect to find it in the khandhas. Hence 'the well-taught Ariyan disciple feels disgust at body, at feeling, at perception, at the activities, at consciousness,' and instead of seeking his essence in the khandhas he makes 'the self' his refuge (kareyya saraṇattano) and

aspires 'to the state that does not change' (accutam padam), i.e. nibbana, which is thus the very opposite of foam, bubbles, jugglery etc. Once again the dualism underlying the whole teaching of the Nikāyas is apparent. If the simple extinctionist view of nibbāna was correct the words 'refuge' and 'un-deceasing state' would have to be invested with a certain amount of black humour to be credible in the context at all. They would simply have to mean that the only refuge from being next to nothing is to become nothing at all and the only state in which there can be no more deceasing is that of the utterly deceased!

Further illustrations abound in the Khandha-samyutta which tend to suggest that the true self is something over and apart from the khandhas which has it within its power to let go of them and be released from them. Two suttas (Nos.99 and 100) use the simile of a dog tied by a leash to a strong stake or pillar. It 'keeps running round and revolving round and round that stake or pillar, even so, brethren, the untaught manyfolk . . . regard body as the Self etc. . . . they are not released therefrom, they are not released from rebirth, from old age and decay, from sorrow and grief, from woe, lamentation and despair . . .'. The leash stands for attachment and the stake samsāra to which we are bound unless we give up our attachment. To be released is not annihilation but freedom, just as a dog off its leash does not vanish into thin air but gets on with its doggy life. What can the dog stand for but the essential self? Or can we afford to operate under canons of interpretation in which not all of the dramatis personae in a story have to be accounted for?

Often it is overinterpreting a story to seek meaning in every detail, but in the following illustration from Sutta 102 we can hardly overlook the role of the sun which strongly suggests the reality of the essential self as it perceives the impermanence of the khandhas:

Just as, brethren, in the autumn season, when the sky is opened up and cleared of clouds, the sun, leaping up into the firmament, drives away all darkness from the heavens and shines and burns and flashes forth; even so, brethren, the perceiving of impermanence, if practiced and enlarged, wears out all sensual lust, wears out all lust for body, all desire for rebirth, all ignorance, wears out, tears out all conceit of 'I am'.

It might be objected from the Theravādin point of view that the sunlight which dispels the darkness in the simile corresponds only to 'the perceiving of impermanence'. Who then is the perceiver? We are told that the conceit 'I am' is 'worn out' and 'torn out' through perceiving the impermanence of the khandhas. This conceit (asmimāna) consists in wrongly identifying the self with the empirical factors. It means that we possess the conceit that one or more of the factors which make up our own personality is permanent. The Buddha's analysis of the factors destroys this conceit by making it no longer possible to assert that the 'I' (which is by definition permanent) resides in any of the khandhas. Ironically, the Theravādin understanding of the teaching is a subtle variant of asmimāna itself because in assuming the khandha analysis to be exhaustive they assumed that the 'I' must be identified with the khandhas or it is nothing. We have not fully escaped from asmimāna as long as we assume that the khandhas are all that we ever imaginably could be.

In fairness to the Theravādin tradition, however, it should be said that it found ways of compensating for the misunderstanding of the anattā teaching, which was, after all, very enigmatic. The tradition preserved its original character remarkably through the centuries of dogmatic consolidation and rationalization of the teaching. Any mystical teaching that depended upon irony and ellipsis to the extent that Gotama's teaching of anattā did could hardly be expected to survive as part of a system. His most marked characteristics as a teacher were his refusal to say anything which might encourage mere speculation and his steady focus on the practical nature of the path. The tradition also preserved these characteristics in its teaching: nibbāna became the term which conveyed the whole of the transcendental significance which at first was shared by the negatively defined attā, but it too was placed beyond speculation.

The Theravādins also preserved the emphasis on the goal as utterly beyond all impermanent, conditioned existence. But it is just here that

both the Theravādin tradition and the Pāli texts upon which it is based have been misunderstood by Western scholars until recently. Neither the suttas nor the commentarial literature of the Theravādin school (beginning with the Abhidhamma Piṭaka) assert that conditioned existence is the whole of existence. Both take the view that reality is of two kinds: impermanent and permanent, or conditioned and unconditioned. Gotama's constant stressing of impermanence is given no plausible explanation by the Western scholars who have taken the negative view, whereas in the new perspective which is beginning to emerge in Western scholarship his stress on impermanence is recognized as typical of the dualistic samāna ascetic teachers of the day. It is increasingly clear that his religious quest was the same, essentially, as theirs: the quest for the eternal, the ātman, the deathless realm. This is the conclusion to which the imagery we have examined in this section lends support.

Before leaving this subject one famous counter-example of imagery which suggests that there is no self deserves to be considered. This is the simile of the chariot, best known in its extended form in the early Theravādin work the Milinda-panhā in which the sage Nāgasena makes dazzling but unconvincing use of the image in order to persuade his hearers that the self has no reality but is merely a name or a convention of language. The image appears once in the Sutta Piṭaka, very briefly, in a poem of one of the Sisters, Vajirā, who has had an encounter with Māra the tempter in which he has asked her whence 'being' (satta) arises:

'Being'! Why dost thou harp upon that word?
 'Mong false opinions, Māra, hast thou strayed.
 Mere bundle of conditioned factors, this!
 No 'being' can be here discerned to be.
 For just as, when the parts are rightly set
 The word 'chariot' ariseth in our minds
 So doth our usage covenant to say:
 'A being' when the aggregates are there.

Nay, it is simply Ill that rises, Ill
 That doth persist, and Ill that wanes away.
 Naught beside Ill it is that comes to pass.¹
 Naught else but Ill it is doth cease to be.¹

¹ Kindred Sayings I pp.169-70.

Māra, being a very weak linguistic philosopher, of course slinks away. Unfortunately, the kind of bamboozling cleverness exhibited in this poem came to be at a premium in the Theravāda tradition as it struggled to maintain fidelity to a teaching that was no longer properly understood. The poem is, nevertheless, evidence that the theory of absolute anattā had gained a foothold in the early Buddhist community by the time that the Samyutta Nikāya was compiled.

From so short a poem we can not tell Vajirā's view of nibbāna but all that she says is compatible with the view that it is the sole permanent reality and refuge from suffering. There is nothing to indicate that she would have been unable to give a positive interpretation to terms for nibbāna in the collection of 'Sayings about the Uncompounded'. These include: 'the end', 'without āsavas', 'truth', 'the further shore', 'the subtle', 'the hard to see', 'the unfading', 'the stable', 'the undecaying', 'the invisible', 'the taintless', 'the deathless', 'the excellent', 'the blissful', 'the security', 'the destruction of craving', 'the wonderful', 'the marvellous', 'the free from ill', 'the state of freedom from ill', 'nibbāna', 'the harmless', 'dispassion', 'purity', 'release', 'non-attachment', 'the island', 'the cave of shelter', 'the stronghold', 'the refuge', 'the goal'.¹ Those who have taken the negative view of nibbāna have to regard many of these terms as hollow rhetoric and sham or else as the subversive growth of a soft 'religious' option within the early tradition (which was approximately Stcherbatsky's point of view).

IV THE BUDDHA'S SILENCE REGARDING THE SELF

R. C. Zaehner writes in the Introduction to his translation of the Bhagavad Gita: 'The Buddhists were so careful not to define what the self was that it has often been maintained that they denied the existence

¹Kindred Sayings IV pp.261-3.

of a self altogether.¹ An increasing number of respectable scholars are daring to say this. But we must now attempt to say why, if the earliest Buddhists believed in the attā, they were silent about its positive attributes? Most puzzling of all, why did Gotama remain silent when he was explicitly asked whether or not the attā exists?

As we have seen, the most characteristic teaching of the Pālī Nikāyas, apart from instruction in morality and meditation and the chain of causality, was to do with the anattā status of the five factors of personality. The logic of this is perfectly uniform: because the five factors which make up our worldly existence are all impermanent we are asked to admit that they are painful, then we are asked whether it is reasonable to think of what is painful that it belongs to us, that we are it, or that it is our self. Quite clearly, the conception of the attā that they had in mind was religious and philosophical rather than merely psychological. The key defining characteristic of attā for them was its permanence from which followed its freedom from dukkha. We can say all of this prior to any decision about whether they believed in it or not. It is the way in which they understood the word, that is all.

It can be stated in an equally abstract way why, given this notion of attā, they were in no position to define it positively even if they did believe in its reality. According to the theory of the five factors of personality even consciousness itself is impermanent and not-self. All that we are in a worldly sense is impermanent. Therefore we have no ordinary consciousness of anything which qualifies as self and no categories (other than negation) drawn from our worldly experience by which to describe the self.

If the Buddha's own mystical experience was such that he was able to associate it with nothing whatever in ordinary empirical experience

¹R. C. Zaehner, The Bhagavad Gītā (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) p.10. I do not wish to endorse his polemical views about mysticism.

it is not surprising that the hallmark of his teaching was dissatisfaction with empirical experience (expressed in the first noble truth of dukkha). Dissatisfaction became the platform on which his entire teaching was raised. He systematically devalued the world and all enjoyment of it through the senses. Personality itself was devalued by a ruthlessly clinical disintegration of it into its factors. Everything that gives value to ordinary human life was either negated or consigned to a lower level of endeavour suitable for lay people. (Even in terms of lay ethics the Buddha paradoxically promised happiness in a future life only as a reward for moving in the direction of asceticism in the present life). His contemporaries must surely have understood that this entire process of devaluation found its compensation in the Buddha's enormously high contrasting valuation of . . . what? Even to name it in worldly terms was to compromise it. A positive terminology would lend itself too easily to the construction of a speculative system for which he had a deep distaste. The relentless emphasis on what the ultimate value is not was his preferred approach. He could even afford to use the term most favoured by the samana mystics of his day, the word 'attā' or 'ātman', provided it was confined to this negative or apophatic usage. No other term suggests a more intimate or fundamental reality than 'attā', and there was no more appropriate conception available to him in the tradition by which to interpret his own mystical experience. Yet he refused to assert the existence of attā in unmistakeably positive terms when he was questioned directly about it. Why?

This can best be explained by taking some illustrations and brief dialogues from the book of 'Kindred Sayings on the Six-fold Sphere of Sense'. In this book the same analysis and logic is applied to the senses that we have seen applied to the khandhas. At times even the same illustrations appear, for example the Jeta Grove analogy is adapted to apply to the senses in a way which confirms the interpretation that the attā is real:

What is not of you, brethren, put it away. Putting it away will be for your profit and welfare.

And what, brethren, is not of you?

The eye, brethren, is not of you. Put it away. Putting it away will be for your profit and welfare.

Objects are not of you . . . eye-consciousness . . . eye-contact that weal and woe or neutral state experienced which arises owing to eye-contact . . . [and so on for tongue etc. down to mind]. Put them away. Putting them away will be for your profit and welfare.

Just as if, brethren, a man should gather, burn or do what he likes with all the grass, all the sticks, branches and stalks in this Jeta Grove, pray would we say "This man is gathering, is burning us, doing what he pleases with us"?

"Surely not, Lord."

Why not?

"Because, Lord, this is not our self, nor the nature of self."

Even so, brethren, the eye is not of you. Put it away . . . Objects and the rest are not of you. Put them away. Putting them away will be for your profit and welfare.¹

In the light of the things that have just been said about relative values this passage is solid evidence that it was indeed the attā or innermost self that was the great compensating value in Gotama's axiology. The value-contrast implied in the illustration is the huge difference in worth between the group of people sitting in the grove and the mere rubbish and debris from windfalls and so on that is cleared away and burned by Anāthapiṇḍika's caretaker. The analogy invites us to consider not only whether the real self is harmed by the loss of the six senses (including as always the mind) but also the great value of the self compared to the senses. The luminous obviousness of the line: "Because, Lord, this is not our self, nor the nature of self" arises from the fact that the bhikkhus are sitting secure and apart from that which is destroyed and from the fact that they are not of commensurate value with what is destroyed. The message is surely that there is that within us which is of immense value when we recognize it and which is untouched by the destruction of all that is impermanent.

But how does this begin to explain the Buddha's refusal to affirm the self in any positive terms? The answer is that the senses are not in fact like the grass, sticks and rubbish in Jeta Grove in being separate from us to the point where it is absurd to identify with them. Our

¹Kindred Sayings IV pp.48-9, repeated five more times on pp.83-4.

common-sense view of self identifies it very closely with the actual operation of the six senses (including as always in Indian psychology the mind itself as the sixth sense). If the Buddha had affirmed the self in positive terms he would not have been able to drive his wedge so firmly between the mystical self and the common-sense self. The Jeta Grove analogy is an example of his attempt to do this by means of hyperbole--it exaggerates extremely the separateness of the sensory consciousness (or of the khandhas in the other example of it that we saw) from the mystical or essential self, the attā. The reason why the Buddha would not give clear positive affirmation of the attā was that it could then be confused with common-sense views of the self. His entire strategy was to hold his conception of attā aloof from common sense in order to preserve its ineffability and also to make it clear to people that it was not one more speculative system but a practical mystical path.

Other systems of the Buddha's day made more compromises with common-sense. The Sāṅkhya school which was also radically dualistic and envisaged the goal as the 'isolation' (kaivalya) of the true self from all that is perishable and changing nevertheless included consciousness on the side of the permanent and unchanging. The very radicalness of the Buddha's conception of attā would have ensured that, in the vigorous intellectual climate for which the Nikāyas themselves are our best evidence, he was constantly forced onto the defensive. This is an obvious and comparatively trivial reason for the predominance of negation in discussions of the attā in the encounters with the followers of other teachers recorded in the Nikāyas. In most of these encounters the Buddha's interlocutors are portrayed as taking a common-sense view of self and identifying it with the khandhas, providing him with many opportunities to deny the common-sense self to be the true self, or attā.

That this is precisely what the Buddha denied, allegedly hundreds of times over, is hardly something about which there need be any more dispute.

There are no adequate grounds for thinking that the Buddha denied that the common-sense self is a reality. That he analysed it so meticulously is sufficient evidence that he believed in its reality. What he very explicitly denied, so many times and in so many ways that there is no room for misunderstanding, is that any feature of this common-sense self qualifies as the attā known to mystical religion. Of this much we can be certain. Whether he believed in this attā is another question—although we might well ask what possible motive he could have had for denying the common self to be the attā if he disbelieved in the attā.

The theory that he was an utter sceptic has problems of its own. Whoever takes this point of view has to explain why the Buddha never said "there is no attā" in unmistakeable terms, just as from the point of view taken here there is the problem of explaining his never having said in so many words that the attā exists. We have been able to give reasons for the silence, whereas it is doubtful that the supporters of the 'scepticism' view can give comparably plausible reasons. They would also have a further problem of explaining how a religion closely resembling other samana mystical religions grew up on the basis of such complete disbelief.

None of the illustrations credited to the Buddha which we have examined would be intelligible on the 'scepticism' theory either. Another example can be given which would be particularly absurd unless he believed both in the reality and in the great value and desirability of the attā. This is the parable of the lute, also from the book of Kindred Sayings on Sense (No.205):

Suppose, brethren, the sound of a lute has never been heard by a rājā or royal minister. Then he hears the sound of a lute and says: "Good man, pray what is that sound so entrancing, so delightful, so intoxicating, so ravishing, of such power to bind?"

Then they say to him: "That, lord, is the sound of what is called a lute, that sound so entrancing, so delightful, so intoxicating, so ravishing, of such power to bind."

Then he says: "Go, my man. Fetch me that lute."

So they fetch him that lute and say to him: "This, lord, is that lute, the sound of which is so entrancing . . . of such power to bind."

Then he says: "Enough of this lute, my man. Fetch me that sound."

They say to him: "This lute, so called, lord, consists of divers parts, a great number of parts. It speaks because it is compounded of divers parts, to wit, owing to the belly, owing to the parchment, the handle, the frame, the strings, owing to the bridge and proper effort of a player . . .

Then that rājāh breaks up that lute into ten or a hundred pieces. Having done so he splinters and splinters it again. Having done that he burns it in a fire then makes a heap of ashes and winnows the heap of ashes in a strong wind or lets them be borne down by a swift stream of a river.

Then he says: "A poor thing is what you call a lute, whatever a lute may be. Herein the world is exceedingly careless and led astray.

Even so, brethren, a brother investigating body as far as there is scope for body, investigating feeling, perception, the activities, investigating consciousness so far as there is scope for consciousness,--in all of these investigations, whatever there be of 'I' or 'I am' or 'Mine', there is none of that for him.¹

While it is true that in the interpretation of all stories which function as parables there is a need to set aside details which are present only for the sake of the story, in this case the reality and beauty of the sound of the lute is much stressed in the rhetoric and is too fundamental a part of the story to overlook in interpreting its meaning as a parable. What other meaning could the story have than that the true self is like the sound of the vinā and is no more to be found in the khandhas than the deluded rājāh is able to find what has so ravished and beguiled him in the mere parts of the instrument? (We may notice, however, that in the version in which it has come down to us the story already has a slight insinuation of a reductionist Theravādin interpretation at the point where we are told that the lute "speaks because it is compounded of divers parts"). The absolute anattā theory invites comparison with the stupidity of the rājāh in that it too takes the instrument to pieces and finds no sound!

What would be an irrelevant inference to make from the story is that without the instrument there can be no sound. The moral pointed up by the Buddha is not this but that in investigating as far as possible into each of the aspects of our phenomenal personality we shall not discover the essential self. What he wishes us to take from the story is his characteristic dualism. He shares the rājāh's relative valuation of

¹Kindred Sayings IV pp. 129-30

the sound and the mere instrument, so it seems! The stock description of the breaking up of the instrument is used here as elsewhere to suggest the fate of all component things. If anything, the conclusion should be that to destroy the instrument is not to destroy the sound. Their relation is that of the material to the spiritual, or of what we can see and touch to what is ungraspable and transcendent. This, at least, is what the rājā's inability to locate the intangible sound suggests. If these are illegitimate inferences from the story it must mean that the Buddhists were using an image--which probably circulated as part of the common stock of illustrations of religious teachers--for a markedly narrower purpose than any contemporary teachers would have had in using it. The story would be only half applicable to the Theravādin view of anattā, the details about the sound and its qualities having to be dismissed as only so much embellishment and the parallel of the sound to the self having to be suppressed in the mind of the hearers, something which the Buddha makes no apparent effort to do.

Indirectly, the story furnishes us with further evidence in support of the view already expressed that the reason for the Buddha's silence concerning the self was that it is ineffable and ungraspable in any crude physical way. A reason for his silence which we have not yet discussed, although it has been foreshadowed, is the avoidance of inevitable misunderstanding in a situation in which the Buddha's interlocutor has a different idea of 'self' in mind from his own. That is to say, the interlocutor's idea of self is one which identifies it with one or more of the khandhas and is therefore an example of the error of sakkāyadiṭṭhi. An example of such a dialogue which supporters of the Theravādin interpretation of anattā often appeal to is the dialogue with Vacchagotta the Wanderer from the end of the book of Kindred Sayings on Sense:

Then Vacchagotta the Wanderer went to visit the Exalted One
 . . . and said:
 "Now, master Gotama, is there a self?"
 At these words the Exalted One was silent.

"How then, master Gotama, is there not a self?"

For a second time also the Exalted One was silent.

Then Vacchagotta the Wanderer rose from his seat and went away.

Now, not long after the departure of the Wanderer the venerable Ananda said to the Exalted One:

"How is it, lord, that the Exalted One gave no answer to the question of the Wanderer Vacchagotta?"

"If, Ānanda, when asked by the Wanderer: 'Is there a self?' I had replied to him: 'There is a self', then Ananda that would be siding with the recluses and brahmins who are eternalists.

But if, Ānanda, when asked: 'Is there not a self?' I had replied that it does not exist, that, Ānanda, would be siding with those recluses and brahmins who are annihilationists.

Again, Ānanda, when asked by the Wanderer: 'Is there a self?' had I replied that there is, would my reply have been in accordance with my knowledge that all things are not-self?"

"Surely not, lord."

"Again, Ānanda, when asked by Vacchagotta the Wanderer: 'Is there not a self?' had I replied that there is not, it would have been more bewilderment for the bewildered Vacchagotta. For he would have said: 'Formerly indeed I had a self, but now I have not one any more.'"¹

From the earlier passages collected in this important section of the book, the "Sayings about the Unrevealed", we know that Vacchagotta and the other 'Wanderers' were all identifiers of the attā with the khandhas.² This is how Buddhism characterised all heretics and adherents of other faiths, including both categories mentioned in the sutta here quoted in full. The 'eternalists', according to the Buddhists, attributed permanence to some feature or other of the phenomenal self, while the 'annihilationists' (likewise believing that the self is identical with one or more of the khandhas) believed that self is destroyed at death. We know, too, from the way in which the Buddha responds to the ten 'Unanswered Questions' that neither of these positions 'fit the case' when the survival after death or otherwise of the Tathāgata is in question--simply because he is not to be identified with the khandhas.³

But silence is always ambiguous and some take this to mean that the Tathāgata does not really exist as we have seen. An example of a recent expression of the negative interpretation which has a certain force is

¹Kindred Sayings IV pp.281-2.

²Ibid. p.277.

³Ibid. p.267.

J. G. Jones's discussion of this passage:

If it is maintained, as it sometimes is, that, because the dhamma is a "middle way" betwixt, amongst other things, the extremes of eternalism on the one hand and annihilationism on the other, it cannot therefore be purely negative, this is to completely misrepresent the canonical passages concerned. In KS IV 282, for example, it is made perfectly clear that the refusal to say that there is no self to survive death (i.e. the opposite of eternalism, which has also been rejected) is due simply to the desire to avoid the confusing impression that "formerly indeed I had a self, but now I have not one any more". It is wrong to say "no self survives death" because to Gotama's enlightened eye there simply is no self. If one were to say to a child "there are no unicorns in London", the child might well think that there are unicorns, but not in London; the correct information would be "there are no unicorns". For precisely similar reasons, Gotama refuses to say "no self survives death"; in his view, the correct information is simply, "there is no self".¹

In keeping with this interpretation Jones sums Buddhism up with the words: "It flees sorrow by fleeing life itself."² This makes it even more negative than annihilationism which at least grants that there is a temporary self with which to make the most of life! In Jones's view the denial of self refers primarily to the existential core of personality and it is the master-stroke in the Buddha's devaluation of human life to have denied that our lives have a centre or focus. Without this we can neither value ourselves nor one another and all relationships are emptied of meaning. (I am only paraphrasing the general message of Jones's book and also the content of many conversations with him here).

In terms of human values this is a powerful criticism. It can hardly be gainsaid that the Buddha's doctrine of self is life-denying and that the khandha analysis undermines respect for persons and love between individuals. From a moral point of view it makes little real difference whether the Buddha denied value to the factors of personality because he believed in no self whatsoever, as Jones contends, or because he believed that the self is something utterly transcending personality, as I have been arguing. In either case ordinary life is devalued and the Buddhist path entails bringing it to an end. But in terms of the passage under discussion, the Buddha's silence is surely more intelligible

¹ John Garrett Jones, Tales and Teachings of the Buddha p.153

² Ibid.

if the 'correct information' is that attā transcends our ordinary concepts of self than if it is that 'simply, "there is no self".' If anything, silence tends to indicate that the correct information is not simple. Silence is an appropriate way to communicate to someone that he or she has come with quite the wrong idea in the first place. This we know, from the other suttas in the group, to be true in Vacchagotta's case. The signal should be taken to mean that, given what Vacchagotta understands by 'self', his questions are ill-conceived.

The contemporary discussion of this issue is greatly complicated by the way in which scholars introduce entirely tangential meanings of 'self' into the debate. Gotama would be silent with them too! The irrelevant idea that Vacchagotta brings with him is that some conditioned thing is attā. Gotama can affirm only what is in keeping with his own 'knowledge that all things [meaning conditioned things] are anattā.' In view of this the silence with which he meets the Wanderer is surely intended compassionately, in order to help him to rise to a higher conception. The remarkable thing about this sutta is that, even through the explanations to Ānanda, the silence remains unbroken, preserved for all posterity! Plainly, the wily Gotama considered that it was in no-one's best interest to be allowed to entertain any speculative views about that which is ineffable and only to be experienced for oneself by following the path. He would either say what it was not, or say nothing. If he left Vacchagotta somewhat at a loss it was because he considered that a salutary state for him to be in, as Gotama tells him in so many words in one of the dialogues with him recorded in the Middle Length Sayings:

You ought to be at a loss, Vaccha, you ought to be bewildered. For, Vaccha, this dhamma is deep, difficult to see, difficult to understand, peaceful, excellent, beyond dialectic, subtle, intelligible to the wise; but it is hard for you who are of another view, another allegiance, another objective, of a different observance and under a different teacher.¹

¹Middle Length Sayings II p.165

However, Gotama does not leave him in this state; it is merely the crisis to which he has been brought to make him receptive for what follows, an analogy drawn from the burning out of a fire:

. . . if someone were to question you thus, Vaccha: that fire that was in front of you and has now been quenched--to which direction has that fire gone from here, to the east or west or north or south? On being questioned thus, Vaccha, what would you reply?

"It does not apply, good Gotama. For, good Gotama, that fire blazed because of a supply of grass and sticks, yet from having totally consumed this and from the lack of other fuel, being without fuel it is reckoned to be quenched."

The lesson here is explicitly about situations in which it is a mistake to make positive assertions (the whole sutta has been about the standard ten 'Unanswered Questions'). We have met with 'grass and sticks' before and know precisely their significance in the patterns of symbolism from which Gotama draws his imagery. So it is with the Tathāgata after death:

Even so, Vaccha, that material shape by which one recognizing the Tathāgata might recognize him--that material shape has been got rid of by the Tathāgata, cut off at the root, made like a palm-tree stump that can come to no further existence and is not liable to arise again in the future. Freed from denotation by material shape is the Tathāgata, Vaccha, he is deep, immeasurable, unfathomable as is the great ocean. . . . That feeling . . . That perception . . . Those habitual tendencies . . . That consciousness by which one recognizing the Tathāgata might recognize him--that consciousness has been got rid of by the Tathāgata . . . 'Arises' does not apply, 'does not arise' does not apply, 'both arises and does not arise' does not apply, 'neither arises nor does not arise' does not apply.

It is unthinkable that Gotama would go to such pains to explain the need for silence if all that he was concealing was a sour and cynical scepticism about the existence of the attā of the mystics. One may speak of a deep scepticism, but one that is 'immeasurable, unfathomable as the great ocean'? And if the 'extinction only' interpretation of the dhamma was correct, surely 'does not arise' would apply to the condition of the Tathāgata after death. What conceivable reason could Gotama have for rejecting the term if simply not arising was the goal?

The final gem in this sutta is the stock simile with which Vacchagotta indicates his wish to become Gotama's disciple:

When this had been said, the Wanderer Vacchagotta spoke thus to the Lord: "Good Gotama, it is like a great sāl-tree not far from

a village or market town whose branches and foliage might be dissolved because of their impermanence, whose bark and young shoots might be dissolved, whose softwood might be dissolved, so that after a time the branches and foliage gone, the bark and young shoots gone, the softwood gone, clear of them it would be established on the pith.¹ . . . even so . . . has dhamma been made clear by the revered Gotama.¹

Although the image is expressive of the way in which the essence of the message now stands revealed to Vacchagotta, the image of the pith (or better the 'heart-wood') appears in many places in the canon as a symbol of the goal itself or of the attā which stands free when all that is impermanent has fallen away from it, or which the woodsman reaches when he has chopped away all that is impermanent.² It is scarcely likely that Gotama would have employed such an image if he believed that we have nothing within us that truly lasts like the heartwood of a tree.

V THE THEORY TESTED AGAINST THE DĪGHA NIKĀYA

In this final section the aim is to put the theory of the meaning of anattā so far outlined to a further test of its credibility, i.e. whether it gains support from, or at least is not contrary to the dhamma as we find it in the longer Dialogues. To summarise three large volumes in a few pages is not possible, but it is possible to lay out the major themes and select the crucial statements in order to judge whether they accord with the interpretation that we have placed on the teaching.

The key to the interpretation of anattā, we have suggested, is to view it against a background of dualism. Understood dualistically, anattā always implies a polarity between that which is not-self and that which, by implication, is self (although for reasons we have explored this self is discussed only by means of apophasis or indirect implication).

¹Middle Length Sayings II pp.166-7

²For example the two suttas on the 'Simile of the Pith' in the Majjhima Nikāya (Nos. 29 and 30) point strongly to the reality of attā as that for which the 'heartwood' stands. KS III pp.119-20 is not a true counter-example - the pithless plantain represents only the khundhas.

The heart of the teaching in the Dīgha Nikāya is practical, to do with morality, meditation and insight into the nature of impermanence, so that there is less emphasis on the anattā teaching which, if we can judge from the sheer frequency of its repetition in the other Nikāyas, was the favourite short piece of instruction of the Buddha's or at least of his early disciples.

The first sutta in the collection, however, is strictly theoretical or rather, anti-theoretical. The 'Brahma-jāla' is the 'perfect net' in which the Buddha purports to catch all 62 of the speculative views opposed to the correct understanding of the dhamma. The opening formula of each part mentions 'some recluse or Brahmin who is addicted to logic and reasoning', for example the semi-eternalist who 'gives utterance to the following conclusion of his own, beaten out by his argumentativeness and based on his sophistry':

"This which is called eye and ear and nose and tongue and body is a self which is impermanent, unstable, not eternal, subject to change. But this which is called heart or mind or consciousness is a self which is permanent, steadfast, eternal, and knows no change, and it will remain for ever and ever."¹

Here, dualism in the sense in which we have defined it is obviously the subject under discussion. The semi-eternalist merely employs a mistaken dualism, claiming something to be permanent which is not, in discriminating between the permanent and the impermanent. There is no hint anywhere in the sutta that dualism is itself a wrong way of thinking which is what we should expect if the 'extinction only' theory of early Buddhism is correct. For if there was absolutely nothing to place on the 'permanent' side of any dualism then surely dualism itself would be under attack.

On the contrary, there is positive evidence that the Buddha was a dualist. In the section of the sutta about 'eel-wrigglers' the second type is said to deny, out of his 'dullness and stupidity', that there is another world. Since the previous example given of eel-wriggling is of

¹Dialogues of the Buddha I p.34

the type who 'does not understand the good in its real nature, nor the evil', the failure to admit the existence of another world is placed on the same level as moral crassness. Eel-wriggling is equivocating about matters about which one ought to be firm, as distinct from indulging in speculative views. Not to see that there is another world is to be as blind as one who will not admit the difference between right and wrong--although that too is not apparent to our immediate senses. The equivocation is mocked with the comic flair that we so often find in the suttas: the eel-wriggler speaks as follows:

"If you ask me whether there is another world, --well, if I thought there were, I would say so. But I don't say so. And I don't think it is thus or thus. And I don't think it is otherwise. And I don't deny it. And I don't say there neither is nor is not another world."¹

It might be objected that by 'another world' here is meant simply the other worlds of the devas etc. But in other passages such as Sutta 34 of the Majjhima Nikāya the 'world beyond' is clearly identified as 'what is not Death's realm', i.e. nibbāna. (The basic metaphor in this sutta is of a herd of cattle crossing the Ganges to the other shore representing nibbāna while the 'safe ford' is the dhamma). The inclusion of three further issues on which eel-wrigglers wriggle is an extraordinary piece of clumsiness on the part of the compilers of the sutta, because it places the Buddha himself in the category of an eel-wriggler--in view of the things he said elsewhere on these issues (namely, whether there are chance beings, whether there is fruit of good and bad actions, and whether a man who has penetrated the truth continues to exist after death) the last is surely a case of the compilers misclassifying their material. On this question the Buddha chose to be silent.

The most interesting section of the Brahma-jāla Sutta is the last in which various recluses and Brahmins are alleged to hold that we can attain 'in this visible world to the highest nibbāna' merely by attaining

¹Dialogues of the Buddha I p.39

to one or other of the four jhānas. The criticism levelled at these arguers is that their nibbāna is based upon contact (through the senses) which gives rise to sensation, craving, the fuel of becoming, rebirth and death, grief, lamentation, pain, sorrow and despair:

It is, brethren, when a brother understands, as they really are, the origin and the end, the attraction, the danger, and the way of escape from the six realms of contact, that he gets to know what is above, beyond them all.¹

Can we think for a moment that this knowledge of what is 'above, beyond them all'—that is, beyond the 'entrapment in the net of the sixty-two modes' in which people 'plunge about, this way and that . . . included in it, caught in it'—could be simply and purely extinction? The refrain of the sutta, which would be repeated at least a dozen times in a full recitation of the Brahma-jāla, also belies the suggestion that the Buddha's 'far better' knowledge is mere extinction:

Now, of these, brethren, the Tathāgata knows that these speculations thus arrived at, thus insisted on, will have such and such a result, such and such an effect, on the future of those who trust in them. That does he know, and he knows also other things far beyond (far better than those speculations); and having that knowledge he is not puffed up, and thus untarnished he has, in his own heart, realized the way of escape from them, has understood, as they really are, the rising up and passing away of sensations, their sweet task, their danger, how they cannot be relied on, and not grasping after any (of those things men are eager for) he, the Tathāgata is quite set free.

These, brethren, are those other things, profound, difficult to realize, hard to understand, tranquillizing, sweet, not to be grasped by mere logic, subtle, comprehensible only to the wise, which the Tathāgata, having himself realized and seen face to face, hath set forth; and it is concerning these that they who would rightly praise the Tathāgata in accordance with truth, should speak.²

What is implied here is that the Buddha is in possession of a positive, saving knowledge about which speculation of any sort is harmful because it lies beyond the grasp of our ordinary intellect.

Implied, too, is the existence in the Buddhists' system of a sort of staircase or ladder of mystical achievement such as we find in many of the European mystics of the Middle Ages. This ladder of mystical

¹Dialogues of the Buddha I pp.53-4

²Ibid. pp. 45-6 etc.

achievement is the core teaching of the first volume of the Dīghā Nikāya. It consists in a progression from morality (sīla), through an account of the stages of meditation (jhāna), to the culminating insight (paññā) into the nature of impermanence and release from the āsavas. The core material outlining these stages is first given in the Sāmañña-phala Sutta and repeated in the subsequent dialogues in the first volume.

This foundation sutta is about the justification for having an Order which Gotama gives to the king Ajātasattu in reply to his question: 'What is the immediate fruit, visible in this very world, of the life of a recluse?'. The advantages are given in ascending order, beginning with the 'honour and respect' shown to members of religious orders, then proceeding through the 'sīlas' which involve mercy and kindness to all living things, honesty, chastity, avoiding lying, slandering or frivolous talk, and various minor rules for monks. Beyond these rules and the sense of joy and ease which mastering them brings are the more characteristically monastic mental disciplines such as guarding the senses and practicing mindfulness and learning to be content with simplicity. These disciplines in turn prepare the recluse for an achievement 'better and sweeter' which is freedom from the five hindrances of worldly longing, the desire to harm, lassitude, nervous anxiety and mental perplexity. Five similes are given for this release from the hindrances, each told as a brief story with a satisfying amount of detail. Since these sections of the sutta were repeated whenever one of the next dozen or so suttas were recited, the similes for release from the hindrances must have been some of the best known illustrations of what might be gained from the life of a monk: a small evocative story is told about indebtedness and regaining solvency, sickness and recovery, imprisonment and release, slavery and freedom, and, finally, being lost in a desert and finding one's way home. In these stories it is surely not hard to see the characteristic dualism of the whole cast of mind of the early Buddhists.

Although we are not yet speaking about the attainment of the goal, there is a foreshadowing of the imagery and the emotions that surround descriptions of the goal.

Beyond these steps in the ascending scale are the Four Jhānas or progressive levels of meditation, followed by the paranormal powers which accrue to the practitioner of meditation. Throughout the account of these levels of attainment the emphasis is on detachment, as one would expect in a world-rejecting or dualistic type of mysticism. This is nowhere more marked than in the description of the attainment of the Heavenly Eye, by which a monk is able to see beings 'as they pass away from one state of existence, and take form in another':

... he recognizes the mean and the noble, the well-favoured and the ill-favoured, the happy and the wretched, passing away according to their deeds.

Just, O king, as if there were a house with an upper terrace on it in the midst of a place where four roads meet, and a man standing thereon, and with eyes to see, should watch men entering a house, and coming forth out of it, and walking hither and thither along the street, and seated in the square in the midst.¹

This is certainly a position above the fray, and since it is not balanced in this sutta by any mention of the meditations upon the different kinds of love (friendliness, sympathy, joy in others' happiness and equanimity) or of the way in which monks should 'live together on friendly terms and harmonious, as milk and water blend, regarding one another with the eye of affection',² one might easily draw the conclusion that the aim of the monastic life is to acquire a cold indifference and superiority to the situation of ordinary mortals. This view of Buddhist morality as entirely self-serving and inward-looking has been expressed by some scholars who take the negative view of Buddhism.³ It needs to be contested as part of the case for a positive view of the goal.⁴ For

¹Dialogues of the Buddha I p.92

²Middle Length Sayings I p.258

³For example R. H. Jones's article 'Theravāda Buddhism and Morality' Journal of the American Academy of Religions Sept. 1979, pp.371-87

⁴See N. R. Reat's reply to Jones, and book and articles by H. Aronson listed in Bibliography.

although early Buddhism was ideologically dualistic its ethics present us with a paradox of rejection of the world on the one hand and concern on the other. Its attitude was certainly not 'let the world go hang'. In the ethics we can discern a pulling away from the dualistic ideology of the samaṇa ascetics which provided the frame of thought or world-view of early Buddhism, so that in the wider view there is no discontinuity between the compassion that Gotama both showed and advocated, and the vow of the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva not to go to his reward until the last blade of grass had been brought to salvation. There is, however, development, and there are many ways in which the Mahāyāna tradition can be seen to have gone deeper, both ethically and philosophically, than the Southern tradition. The weakness of the dualistic phase of Indian thought (which Gotama, in his distaste for speculative views, seems to have appreciated) is reflected in its inability to produce a plausible cosmology or any sort of 'theodicy' in order to explain how we can have a morally orderly universe and yet suffer. According to the theory of karma we are responsible for our own suffering, but karmic theory within a dualistic frame has no way of explaining the interpenetration of samsāra with nibbāna that a positive ethical outlook implies.

That this dualistic frame profoundly influenced the way in which the early Buddhists conceived the goal is well demonstrated in the final attainment of the recluse as it is described in the Sāmañña-phala sutta. The highest step on the mystical stairway that we have been describing is 'knowing as it really is' the origin of pain, combined with the ceasing of the āsavas, i.e. freedom from hankering for future existence on either the sensuous plane or the higher planes of temporal existence, and freedom from ignorance. In other words, there is no longer a vestige of clinging to samsaric existence. This must either be because the goal was conceived as mere extinction, or because it was conceived as utterly beyond the entire samsaric level of reality. Looking back then at samsāra is likened to the

detached and tranquil experience of looking into a rock pool at the forms of life that one sees there:

Just, O king, as if in a mountain fastness there were a pool of water, clear, translucent and serene; and a man standing on the bank, and with eyes to see, should perceive the oysters and the shells, the gravel and the pebbles and the shoals of fish as they move about or lie within it; he would know: "This pool is clear, translucent and serene, and there within it are the oysters and the shells, the sand and the gravel, and the shoals of fish are moving about or lying still.

This, O king, is an immediate fruit of the life of a recluse, visible in this world, and higher and sweeter than the last. and there is no fruit of the life of a recluse, visible in this world, that is higher and sweeter than this.¹

This simile could easily be seized upon by the 'extinction only' school of thought to prove that the Buddha envisaged nothing higher than a state of perfect detachment and calm with regard to all life in the world. But it must be borne in mind that Ajātasattu's question was a quite specific one, about the 'immediate' fruit of being a recluse which is 'visible in this world'. His outlook is this-worldly, and so far as he can, Gotama accommodates this orientation of the king's by answering him in terms of the immediate, practical results of following the path. It is a very different kind of dialogue from what he might have with someone who had a passion for the ultimate questions, like Vacchagotta, to whom Gotama would always indicate (without spelling it out) that there was an ineffable knowledge to which the path would also lead.

A great many of the dialogues are of this kind, that is to say, they are discussions with fairly limited and down-to-earth inquirers whose interest is confined to the immediate benefits of the path. They are never sent packing; instead Gotama pitches his talk at their level, as in the following sutta in which he speaks of 'generosity', of right conduct, of heaven, of 'the vanity and defilement of lusts', the advantages of renunciation, of sorrow, its origin and cessation, and of the path. This sutta, too, could be taken as evidence that

¹Dialogues of the Buddha I pp.93-4

all that the message of the Buddha amounts to is expressed in the stock formula: 'Whatsoever has a beginning in that is inherent also the necessity of dissolution.'¹ However, the meaning of this formula, which in this sutta the Brahmin Pokkharasādi utters when he attains the 'Eye for the Truth', does not appear in the same light if we view it as an expression of the recognition that nothing in this world can assuage the thirst for the infinite--in other words, if the formula is viewed as only one side of the impermanence/permanence polarity or dualism.

The next five suttas are all similar in the one respect that they afforded the compilers of the Dialogues further opportunities to include the core material given first in the Sāmañña-phala Sutta. When Gotama spoke to anyone, the suttas show, he put himself as far as possible in the position of his interlocutor, attacking none of the person's most cherished beliefs, but finding some common ground. Often he accepts an opponent's terminology and teaches by the sly means of placing a higher meaning on the words, as in the notion of a 'true Brahmin' (in the Sonadanda Suttanta) or of the best 'sacrifice' (in the Kūṭadanta Suttanta) or even the otherwise alien notion to Buddhism of union with God (in the Tevijja Suttanta). If Gotama's aim throughout these suttas was to teach these followers of other teachers and traditions that their expectations of finding in his system any final, positive religious goal was mistaken and that the sole purpose of the dhamma that he taught was to awaken them to the impermanence and worthlessness of all existence, his aim got buried somewhere in the process of transmission! Everything in the suttas is in accord with his being a believer in something that is transcendent and permanent, in fact, a believer in the attā.

The Mahāli and Jāliya suttas are examples of this. In them the same dialogue occurs in which Gotama is asked by two recluses if the 'soul is

¹Dialogues of the Buddha I p.135

the same thing as the body, or is the soul one thing and the body another?' His reply is to give them the teaching about the jhānas and the ultimate insights into impermanence and the loss of the āsavas, culminating in the stock formula for the attainment of Arahantship: 'In him, thus set free, there arises the knowledge of his emancipation, and he knows: "Rebirth has been destroyed. The higher life has been fulfilled. What had to be done has been accomplished. After the present life there will be no beyond!"' Gotama then asks the recluses whether anyone who has reached this point would be ready to take up the questions that they have asked: 'I, sirs, know thus and see thus. And nevertheless I do not say the one or the other.'¹ The word used for soul here is 'jīva' rather than 'attā', but the reasons for Gotama's silence are no different, we can infer, from those we have already discussed. On the other hand, if he was a total disbeliever and sceptic concerning any kind of soul this was surely an unsurpassable opportunity to have made himself perfectly understood on the matter. There is no conceivable reason why he would not have given the recluses a straight answer.

The discussion of soul-theories occupies an important part in two other suttas in the collection, the Poṭṭhapāda and Mahā-Nidāna Suttanta. In the Poṭṭhapāda sutta the question discussed is very similar to the one we have just encountered: Poṭṭhapāda seeks an answer to whether the consciousness 'is identical with a man's soul (attā), or is consciousness one thing and the soul another?'² Because the asking of this question follows directly upon Gotama's instruction to Poṭṭhapāda on how even the most refined kind of consciousness experienced in the highest states of meditation can be brought to cessation, we must infer that the question that Poṭṭhapāda is really asking is whether Gotama teaches that the soul

¹Dialogues of the Buddha I p.204. The translation of the Arahant formula here by T. W. Rhys Davids, ending in: 'there will be no beyond', is biased towards the 'extinction only' interpretation which he espoused. All that the words mean is that there will be no further samsaric existence.

²Ibid. p.252

is also itself of a nature to cease. This is certainly the question that we find Gotama attempting to answer squarely and in the negative. He proves to Poṭṭhapāda that whatever notion of soul he possesses, it must be distinct from that which is impermanent or it is not worthy of being termed 'soul'.¹ In the obviously stylized account of the dialogue that we have in the sutta Poṭṭhapāda runs through the standard speculative views about soul (that it is identical with the body, with the six senses as a functioning complex including mind, or with the formless consciousness experienced in meditation). In each case, Gotama points out, the same fatal objection applies, that is, that the theory in question identifies soul with something that is of a nature to arise and pass away. Thus, he says to Poṭṭhapāda, on each account, 'you can see how consciousness must be one thing, and soul another.' (My emphasis).² How can this be construed as a denial of the existence of soul? The lesson is surely not to identify the attā with anything which our experience tells us is impermanent. Soul is not of a nature to cease, therefore not even the sublimest states of consciousness experienced in meditation should be confused with it, the context of the dialogue indicates. It is remarkable how the obvious meaning of Gotama's words came to be lost under the layered encrustation of later dogma.

The illustrations which follow reinforce our interpretation. The soul theories which Gotama says spring from indulging in the speculation: 'The soul is perfectly happy and healthy after death' are like a man saying that he is in love with the most beautiful woman in the land yet he is unable to describe her because he has never seen her; or again, like a man putting up a staircase at a crossroads when he has no idea even in which of the four directions he will build the mansion to which the staircase will be the entry.

¹Dialogues of the Buddha I pp.252-4. T. W. Rhys Davids again shows his bias by having Gotama ask Poṭṭhapāda: 'Do you really fall back on the soul?' instead of the only question that makes sense in the context: 'What 'soul' do you fall back on?' which is the question Poṭṭhapāda promptly answers.

²Ibid. p.253.

Only an extremely superficial reading of these illustrations could lead to the conclusion that they imply that the soul simply does not exist. The absurdity of the soul-theories in question is that they are built on no adequate present experience of happiness from which to infer the soul's happiness after death. As always, these indulgences in speculative views are based on asmimāna, or pride in some aspect of our present life which is denied to be impermanent and therefore subject to dukkha. To conclude that there is no soul from this passage is to read it out of context. Soul is not denied, only that those who hold speculative views about it have not experienced the real attā--which in the illustrations corresponds to the beautiful woman or the fine mansion. As usual in Gotama's imagery the attā is likened to things which are supremely desirable and also real. We do not find the attā likened anywhere to things which do not exist, such as unicorns or the classic example in Indian argument, the hare's horn. It is logically impossible that the most beautiful woman in the land should not exist!

That Gotama was pointing to the real attā in these illustrations is made perfectly obvious in his subsequent use of the same imagery in the same sutta. He asks Poṭṭhapāda (rhetorically) what 'personality' we have to put away in order to be rid of the evil dispositions and increase the dispositions that lead to purification, enabling us to 'see face to face' and 'realize the full perfection and grandeur of wisdom'--and answers it himself: 'Why this very personality that you see before you is what I mean.'¹ This is to put up one's staircase 'at the very foot of the palace itself.' The illustration has been given an adept twist here in order to show that we can locate the right place instantly for our staircase up which to mount into the palace of the attā through recognizing precisely where and what is our false self (i.e. this self which is characterised in the three modes--material, mental and formless--all of which are anattā). By putting

¹Dialogues of the Buddha I p.261

away from us that which is impermanent, in subjugating or purifying this ordinary personality, we erect our staircase in just the right place from which to enter the palace of the true attā. If this is not what is meant, what does the palace stand for? The Theravādins can say that it stands for nibbāna, which is reasonable enough except that it overlooks the fact that the imagery is specifically related to soul-theories in this sutta. But the 'extinction only' theory which is constructed on the absolute view of anattā plus the further inference that nibbāna only meant extinction has nothing in it to which the palace imagery could plausibly correspond.

Those scholars who take the completely negative view of early Buddhism tend, like David Kalupahana, to emphasize the teaching of causality as the central doctrine. This teaching we have not so far discussed in any adequate detail in order to show how it can be accommodated in the positive account that we have given of attā and nibbāna. Reference is first made to it in the Dīgha Nikāya in the Mahāpadāna Suttanta, the 'Story of the Great Ones', which is a late Nikayan production containing a developing Buddhology. (There is reason to think, too, that the theory of causality was considerably developed after the time of Gotama and given a more prominent place than it perhaps deserves by the lovers of system in the Order. If the fully-fledged paticca-samuppāda stemmed directly from Gotama it makes it easier to cast him in the role of philosopher, as Stcherbatsky and Kalupahana would like to do, rather than as the founder of a mystical religion, as he has been portrayed in the present study). In this sutta the Buddhas of the past aeons are said to have taught the doctrine of the chain of causality just as Gotama now teaches it:

Then to Vipassi the Bodhisat, brethren, this occurred:--"Lo! I have won to this, the Way to enlightenment through insight (vipassanā). And it is this, that from name-and-form ceasing, cognition ceases, and conversely; that from name-and-form ceasing, the six-fold field ceases; from the six-fold field ceasing, contact ceases; from contact ceasing feeling ceases; from feeling ceasing, craving ceases; from craving ceasing, grasping ceases; from grasping ceasing, becoming ceases; from becoming ceasing, birth ceases; from birth ceasing, decay and dying, grief, lamentation, ill, sorrow and despair cease. Such is the ceasing of this entire body of Ill.¹

¹Dialogues of the Buddha II p.27

This, of course, is only a summary of the chain of causality (which appears in both ten and twelve-fold versions). It is also the negative or reverse way of listing the sequence of causes, the opposite mode being the full explanation of how the 'entire body of Ill' comes about. Unless we take a dualistic view of this causal sequence, that is, unless we look for what it implies in religious terms, the passage which immediately follows is almost unintelligible:

"Ceasing to be, ceasing to be!" --at that thought, brethren, there arose to Vipassi the Bodhisat a vision into things not called before to mind, and knowledge arose, reason arose, wisdom arose, light arose.¹

It is just possible that this kind of language might be used to hail an important philosophical realization, i.e. that all things are impermanent and that there is a way to bring suffering to an end just because of this. This could be the sum total of Gotama's discovery: simply that if we nip in the bud the whole chain of causality there will be no more suffering because there will be no more arising of individual existence. But, if so, how can we account for the lines of poetry that are put in Vipassi's mouth when he accepts Brahma's challenge to teach the dhamma to all men:

Wide open are the doors of the Deathless! [Amatassa dvārā]
 Let those that hear renounce their empty faith [in rites etc.]
 Despairing of the weary task, O Brahmā,
 I spake not of this doctrine, sweet and good to men.²

Surely, the two things are merely opposite sides of the one coin--the doors of the Deathless are flung open upon the realization that suffering is not permanent. 'All that is impermanent is suffering! Therefore put away what is impermanent,' --this is the message that is repeated hundreds of times in the suttas. The chain of causality is only one more piece of analysis with the purpose of distancing the disciple from his attachments, working in the same way as the khandha analysis works by casting a cold and dispassionate eye on all that man is in a worldly sense.

¹Dialogues of the Buddha II p.28

²Ibid. p.33. Unaccountably, T. W. Rhys Davids translates 'amatassa' as 'Nirvāna'--to accord with his view that nirvāna meant simple extinction?

The fullest exposition that the doctrine of paticca-samuppāda receives in the Canon is in the Mahā-Nidāna Suttanta, but this sutta is of more interest for our purposes because of its discussion of the soul-theories in its second half. The details about causality are the same in principle as the summary form of the teaching that was quoted above. From Section 23 onwards the discussion about soul-theories introduces arguments which we have not yet considered, although the theories themselves we have met with--all of which the wise 'do not declare' according to Gotama, 'with regard either to the present life, or to the next life'.¹ He then goes on to give a more detailed refutation of the identification of the attā with one of the khandhas than is to be found anywhere else in the Piṭakas. This is a rejection of 'feelings' as a candidate to be the soul or true self:

Herein, Ānanda, to him who affirms:--"My soul is feeling"--answer should thus be made:--"My friend, feeling is of three kinds. There is happy feeling, painful feeling, neutral feeling. Of these three feelings, look you, which do you consider your soul is?"

When you feel a happy feeling, Ānanda, you do not feel a painful feeling or a neutral feeling; you just feel a happy feeling. And when you feel a painful feeling, you do not feel a happy feeling or a neutral feeling. And when you do not feel a neutral feeling, you do not then feel a happy feeling or a painful feeling; you just feel a neutral feeling.

Moreover, Ānanda, happy feeling is impermanent, a product [saṅkhata], the result of a cause or causes, liable to perish or pass away, to become extinct, to cease. So too is painful feeling. So too is neutral feeling. If when experiencing a happy feeling one thinks:--"This is my soul,"--when that same happy feeling ceases, one will also think:--"My soul has departed." So too when the feeling is painful or neutral. Thus he who says:--"My soul is feeling,"--regards as his soul something which, in this present life, is impermanent, is blended of happiness and pain, and is liable to begin and end. Wherefore, Ānanda, it follows that this aspect:--"My soul is feeling"--does not commend itself.²

The reasoning here depends upon the unspoken premise that it is absurd to conceive of the self in such a way that we could say of it 'byagā me attā', or 'my self has vanished.' The very definition of attā is that it is permanent. Nowhere is it implied that this attā does not exist.

¹Dialogues of the Buddha II p.63

²Ibid. pp.63-4

On the contrary, the dialogue loses its gravity and coherence within the context unless it is assumed that Gotama is attempting to teach Ānanda the real nature of the attā by way of negative instances. The next part of the argument is subtly counterpointed against the passage which we have just quoted:

Herein again, Ananda, to him who affirms:--"Nay, my soul is not feeling, my soul is not sentient,"--answer should thus be made:--
"My friend, where there is no feeling of anything, can you there say:--'I am'?"¹

A further variant, the denial that the soul is feeling etc. while claiming that it has these properties, is dismissed on the grounds that even then one could not say 'I myself am' because there would be 'no feeling whatever'. Obviously, the absolute view of anattā could be thought to be necessarily implied in this pincer movement of Gotama's logic, but if this view is taken the following passage is rendered unintelligible--for it shows another way to understand Gotama's purpose in driving us from both apparent logical alternatives in a case like this. This is not (as the tradition has naively thought) to give up believing in the attā at all but to give up grasping at concepts of it because it lies beyond the reach of conceptual thought. What other construction could be placed on the following passage?

Now when a brother, Ānanda, does not regard soul under these aspects,--either as feeling, or as non-sentient, or as having feeling, --then he, thus refraining from such views, grasps at nothing whatever in the world; and not grasping he trembles not; and trembling not, he by himself attains to perfect peace [paccattamyeva parinibbāyati, which would be better translated 'he attains utter nibbāna in his very self']. And he knows that birth is at an end, that the higher life has been fulfilled, that what had to be done has been accomplished, and that after this present world there is no beyond [or better, 'there is no more life in these conditions' as other translators give this stock formula for the attainment of Arahantship].

And of such a brother, Ānanda, whose heart is thus set free, if anyone should say:--"His creed is that an Arahant goes on after death" --that were absurd. Or: "His creed is that an Arahant does not go on . . . does, and yet does not, go on . . . neither goes on or does not go on after death"--all that were absurd. Why is that? because,

¹ Dialogues of the Buddha II p.64

Ananda, whatever verbal expression there is and whatever system of verbal expression, whatever explanation there may be, and whatever system of explanation, whatever communication is possible and whatever system of communication, whatever knowledge there is and whatever sphere of knowledge, whatever round of life and how far the round is traversed,--by mastery over all this that brother is set free. But to say of a brother who has been so set free by insight:--"He knows not, he sees not"--that were absurd!¹

Surely, no clearer rebuttal than this could be given of both the pure extinctionist and the pure agnostic positions that are often attributed to Gotama. Scholars who maintain the 'extinction only' view of the goal might agree that agnosticism is ruled out (by the last sentence) but still wish to assert that what the bhikkhu set free by insight 'knows and sees' is a vision of engulfing nihilism that makes speculation irrelevant. But this is scarcely coherent as well as being quite out of keeping with the emotional tone of the passage. The passage is not fully intelligible on any other interpretation than the one we have taken, and which the context also strongly corroborates, i.e. that the reality of the attā lies beyond all our known modes of communication or expression. It is beyond conceptual thought and beyond samsāra, yet it can be 'known' and 'seen'--the refusal to elaborate upon these words preserves Gotama's purposeful and pregnant silence which we have learned to expect when the true nature of the attā is in question. If the non-existence of the attā of the mystics was what he wished to communicate we can only observe that silence was a singularly ineffective way of doing it, whereas on the opposite view that it was the reality of the attā that he wished to communicate it is at least clear that he had no alternative to silence even at the risk of misunderstanding.

There is a great deal more in the Dīgha Nikāya which deserves mention in relation to the theme of this study, but this chapter must be brought to a close--unfortunately without dealing with the material in the sequence of mythological suttas which throw light on the relation between the Brahmā

¹Dialogues of the Buddha II pp.65-6

world and nibbāna, or the important detail with which meditation is treated in the Mahā-Satipaṭṭhāna Suttanta or the interesting treatments of the theme of eternalism in the Sampasādaniya Suttanta and evolution in the Aggañña Suttanta.

Something must be said, however, about the last words and teachings attributed to Gotama in the sutta in which his death is recorded, the Mahā-Parinibbāna Suttanta. This sutta is a mosaic of early and later material which is sometimes not hard to discern, for example we know we are dealing with later material where Ānanda is held to blame for the Buddha's death because he did not plead enough with him to stay (having heard from the Master's own mouth that a Buddha can prolong his life for an aeon). This is repeated many wearying times then, suddenly, we find what seems to be part of the older tradition in which Gotama says:

But now, Ānanda, have I not formerly declared to you that it is in the very nature of all things near and dear to us that we must divide ourselves from them, leave them, sever ourselves from them? How, then, Ananda, can this be possible--whereas anything whatever, born, brought into being and organized, contains within itself the inherent necessity of dissolution--how then can this be possible that such a being should not be dissolved? No such condition can exist! And that which, Ānanda, has been relinquished, cast away, renounced, rejected and abandoned by the Tathāgata--the remaining sum of life surrendered by him--verily with regard to that the word has gone forth . . . at the end of three months from this time the Tathagata will die!¹

Whatever we make of his alleged prediction of his own death, the language here, in the first sentence especially, deserves comment. It is not just Ānanda's impending bereavement obviously, that Gotama is talking about here, but 'all things near and dear to us', and the question must arise as to who and what is meant by 'we . . . ourselves' in this context where it is said 'we must divide ourselves from them, leave them, sever ourselves from them'. If Gotama's central teaching was that we have no self, this language would surely be inappropriate at such a moment, especially when the utterance is plainly a general teaching intended to transcend the

¹Dialogues of the Buddha II pp.126, repeated at 158-9, 177, 179, 184-5

particular situation in which it was delivered (as the repetitions of the passage in the sutta acknowledge). If the ordinary khandha-self was all that was meant then what is to be 'divided . . . left . . . severed' from what? And, further on in the quoted passage, what is the Tathāgata who is able to 'relinquish . . . cast away . . . renounce . . . reject . . . abandon . . . surrender' what is left of the life of his khandhas? Have we merely caught Gotama at an unguarded moment, or did he use naturally and uninhibitedly language which takes for granted the reality of self as what we are intrinsically, over and apart from our khandhas?

It would be best to pass over the much disputed farewell to his disciples in which Gotama tells them to be 'lamps to yourselves, a refuge to yourselves', (or 'take the self as lamp, the self as refuge?'),¹ because the argument is too complex--it will be enough to say that the issue is far from settled as to how the lines should be translated, and even if the reflexive use of attā is intended here it does not create an obstacle to the thesis that has been put forward about the interpretation of anattā in the texts in which the khandhas are said to be not-self. Our inability to find examples of the positive use of attā (which has not been established) would show nothing more than that Gotama was extraordinarily consistent in applying his negative method of defining the attā. I think that there are in fact hundreds of positive uses of the word in the Canon which apply quite naturally and unaffectedly to the core of personality which, as it were, inhabits the khandhas or mere factors of personality. But this needs to be argued elsewhere.²

One such use of attā, followed closely by an image which attests to the reality of attā, may be used to conclude this chapter. In the

¹Dialogues of the Buddha II p.108

²Johansson and Pérez-Remón have gone a good way towards clarifying how the core of personality was understood by the early Buddhists, both in relation to ethical activity and to the attainment of nibbāna. The pioneer work in this area by Mrs Rhys Davids and I. B. Horner also needs to be freshly assessed, since it appears to contain much that is of value.

midst of what appears to be late material in which Māra tempts Gotama to die immediately while Ananda pleads for him to live on for an aeon, there appears a passage which seems to be grounded in an actual event despite the mythology with which it is surrounded:

Thereupon the Exalted One, at Cāpāla Shrine, mindful and self-possessed let go his life's aggregate [āyusankhāraṃ]. And when the life's aggregate was let go by the Blessed One there was a mighty earthquake, and there burst a terrific hair-raising thunder. And then the Blessed One, knowing this to be its meaning, at that time, uttered these solemn words:
 Weighing the immeasurable and becoming,
 The sage rejected the aggregates of his becoming,
 In love with the inner self [ajjhatarato], well-composed,
 He split his individual existence [attasambhavaṃ]
 as it were a coat of armour.¹

The word 'ajjhatarato' is translated by T. W. Rhys Davids as 'inward joy' whereas Pérez-Remón gives the literal meaning; but taking it in either sense, the dramatic action of Gotama's spirit and the attitude of mind and heart with which it is done are well conveyed. The passage does not refer to his actual death but to an earlier event (perhaps three months earlier) which must have been of some significance for him and for his disciples. The image of a man breaking out of, or free from, a coat of armour--here specifically referring to the temporal part of his being--surely bespeaks the reality of the inner self in comparison to something external to it which, in this life, imprisons it as if in a case of iron. Here, once again, is imagery that is particularly unsuitable to express the doctrine of absolute anattā if that is what was in the minds of the early Buddhists. The passage rather calls to mind the description of the freed man in Gotama's dialogue with Vacchagotta: 'Freed from denotation by consciousness is the Tathāgata, Vaccha, he is deep, immeasurable, unfathomable as is the great ocean.'²

¹Joaquín Pérez-Remón Self and Non-Self in Early Buddhism pp.36-7.
 The corresponding passage in Dialogues of the Buddha is in Vol. II, p.113.

²Middle Length Sayings II p.166

CONCLUSION

This study was begun with the aim of showing that nibbāna, as the early Buddhists understood it, could not have been simple extinction as some scholars still maintain, but a transcendent goal which is beyond everything impermanent and caught up in suffering. It seemed too implausible that monks, nuns and lay people would have worked with such earnestness, joy and energy towards nothing more than extinction. As the first chapter was researched it became obvious that what led Western scholars to think that this was the goal was nothing that the texts say about nibbāna--they passed over with only a vague unease the many texts which show nibbāna to have been in the minds of the early Buddhists something extremely positive with names like 'the Imperishable' (amata) and 'the Transcendent' (lokuttara). What impressed scholars as the purest nihilism was the doctrine of anattā, the belief that there is in a human being no persisting essence, when it was combined with a passion to bring rebirth to an end. These scholars conceived the ending of the samsāric series in a way analogous to the extinction of a biological species, such as, let us say, the New Zealand moa. When the moa became extinct it was because there was no permanent essence of 'moa-ness' over and above its genetic characteristics that the species will never arise in the world again. In this way, scholars argued, nibbāna must have been for the early Buddhists merely extinction or nothingness, in the absence of any essence in the human being which could survive the ending of the karmic lineage.

As the second chapter of the study shows, however, the Buddhists themselves never drew this inference; it is entirely a construction placed on Buddhism by the Western mind. As reasonable, indeed inescapable, as it seems to draw the inference, the Buddhists themselves always stopped short of it, instead holding in tension the teachings of 'no self' and

of nibbāna as a mystical paradox. They were able to point to many texts in their scriptures which speak of the goal as being beyond the grasp of the mind, or to the Buddha's silence when he was asked whether or not a liberated person exists after death (the very silence that Western scholars thought gave them licence to assume that the goal was nullity).

In the scriptures, too, there were texts such as the following:

For him who has gone home there is no measure; that whereby he might be designated no longer exists; where all phenomena have ceased, there also all possibilities of naming are gone. (Sutta-nipata 1074-6)

This suggests an abstract continuity of some kind about which it is not possible, and indeed expressly forbidden, to speculate.

Yet the third chapter of this study has shown that it is almost certain that Gotama gave his followers more to hope for than this. As improbable as it seems, our evidence strongly suggests that there has been a two thousand-year misunderstanding of Gotama's original teaching. Not only the nuances and the imagery in his utterances, but also their logic, imply an inner essence in the human being that is so unimaginably free of all worldly entanglements that we do not begin to grasp its nature until we have ceased to identify ourselves exclusively with the perishable body and mind. If the passage quoted above is understood in this light the goal does not appear as abstract and unattractive, since that which finds its true 'home' is the essential self, the 'I' which alone persists. We have shown in the final chapter that Gotama's refusal to speak in positive terms of this true self sprang from his penetration of our habit of understanding ourselves entirely in terms of our day-to-day experience, which was not for him the highest or truest experience. If he affirmed the self he knew that it would encourage us to continue to grasp at the perishable self or some feature of it mistaking it for what is permanent; so he confined himself to speaking only of what the self is not, letting his affirmation consist in teaching compassionately a path that could lead to an experience like his own of that self.

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